PONNIYIN SELVAN

BOOK 4: THE JEWELLED CROWN

Kalki R Krishnamurthy

Translated By

Pavithra Srinivasan

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Ponniyin Selvan

- Kalki R Krishnamurthy

Book 4: *The Jewelled Crown*

Translated into English by
Pavithra Srinivasan

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The original Thamizh edition first published in serial form in the Thamizh magazine, Kalki from 1950 to 1954

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Translator's Note

When I first read Ponniyin Selvan, I could barely pause to take in the various characters, the descriptions and historical details as I negotiated the twists and turns that came at breakneck speed with each chapter, practically trembling to get to the next. And that held good for the first three books, the suspense mounting and mounting … until Book Four, when everything sort of slowed down, and seemed to ooze at a snail's pace. My teenage self could barely wait to get through it.

That was only the first time, though. As my readings progressed, along with my age and understanding, newer nuances made themselves known to me; newer facets, insights and perspectives as I puzzled over the motives and impulses of this character and that. By far the one that fascinated me the most—and yet allowed little understanding, was Nandhini.

Why? You may ask. *She's fairly straightforward as a villain, isn't she*? In a matter of speaking. She's established as an antagonist very early in Book One, and then progresses fairly quickly to the position of villainess extraordinaire in Book Three. We do get glimpses of the darkness deep within her, and the fire of vengeance that consumes her … but it isn't until Book Four that we're led behind the veil of her tortured soul, so to speak.

[Spoiler: Chapter 46 of Book 4 in this epic saga is where you receive a few insights into the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani's character.]

At first, I took Nandhini's character at face-value. She was the archetypal evil woman, beautiful beyond belief, who decided to use her God-given powers to exact her revenge—but there existed several very valid motives behind her actions; motives that were rooted in the indignities she suffered; the miseries she endured; the grief and agony of watching her lover killed before her eyes … and the almost unbearable humiliation of having to be the wife of a man old enough to be her grandfather. All these and more turned her into what she was, and it was a masterful evolution …

…except that I couldn't quite wrap my head around it.

Vandhiyathevan was easy for me to understand. So were Poonguzhali, Kundhavai and Vanathi, for they were all people I'd encountered at some point. Kandamaaran, Pazhuvettarayar and Aditha Karikalan were not beyond comprehension either. But Nandhini, with venom soaked heart and tongue, every action tinged

with poison, unrelentingly vicious and hateful, was not someone I could relate to. Most people, I reasoned, were shades of light grey.

Until I remembered that I ***had***, indeed, met someone like her. More than met, actually; known really well. A close relative of mine, in fact.

She'd been married very early, and to someone not her equal in wealth, education or sophistication—and to add insult to injury, he was beneath her, in her opinion, in looks as well. It was a terrible match—and it ruined her.

Her natural intelligence, she felt was blunted with nowhere to focus. She could have worked, but felt that she was above such things. No woman of her stature worked; that was the job of menials. Doubtful finances added to her woes—and to a woman who prided herself on her fashion sense, this was a blow. She had been described as a youthful, ambitious woman who took life head-on … and as the years passed, self-assurance morphed into narcissism. She believed herself to be extremely charismatic, beloved by all; those who came into contact with her were instantly bowled over. They hoped for one kind look from her; one kind touch, and yearned for her recognition. Case in point: when the-then prime ministerial candidate Rajiv Gandhi visited her hometown and passed through the streets in procession, she was convinced that he had seen her … and been smitten by her. Such were her delusions of grandeur that as the years went by, the obsession grew; ten years later, she was telling everyone that he had actually descended from his car, shaken her hand, and told her how stunning she was!

But inner conflict warred with outer reality; by the time I knew her, she was a bitter, resentful person who could see no good in the world.

Every word was a poisoned dart; every look a vicious dagger. Something as simple as a home-cooked meal, a ritual or a shopping trip could end in tears at her brutal comments—and events such as weddings and bride-viewings were particularly nerve-wracking. She

created conflict where there was none; fuelled controversy where existed none. Completely unknown people came to blows over seemingly random comments—comments that were traced back to her too late. Beauty and talent in others disgusted her, for she had access to neither—and therefore, no one else could, or should. Any and every unscrupulous method could be used to justify her ends—and the sufferings of those involved were a source of intense enjoyment.

Not unlike Nandhini, she willingly spread false reports, blackened names and threw entire families into chaos—for she had no happiness in hers. All men existed to serve her; all women existed to be destroyed by her. She hated those who recognized her true character, and despised those who didn't. Ruin and damnation were her rationale for life; nothing else existed. When she died, four years ago, it was with a sort of resigned hatred that others still lived, while she had to go.

Even now, well after her death, she's spoken of with a sort of hushed fear. As though invoking her very name will usher in an era of horror.

Understanding her character, as twisted as it was, helped me realize the depths of depravity to which a human could sink. And when added extraordinary beauty, charisma and a genuine target for hatred—all of which my relative lacked—the extraordinary machinations she could set in motion. That was Nandhini. And translating this volume helped me analyze her in a way I couldn't, as a teenager for I recognized that she could inspire more than just anger, scorn and contempt—she also roused great pity.

I hope you enjoy reading my translation of ***Book 4 of Ponniyin Selvan: The Jewelled Crown***, just as much as I enjoyed translating it.

Pavithra Srinivasan,
January 2021,

Chennai.

About Kalki R Krishnamurthy

Most men manage to embrace a single vocation in their lifetime—but very few are successful in what they choose to do with their life. Even among these, Kalki Ra Krishnamurthy was something of a rarity, for he managed to be a freedom- fighter, a talented writer, traveller, poet, journalist and a veritable connoisseur of the fine arts. He formed a part of the elite breed of writers who could churn their reader's emotions with their passionate words, or rouse them to wrath with powerful expressions.

Born on September 9, 1899, in the village Buddhamangalam, in the Thanjavur District, to Ramaswamy Iyer and Thaiyal Nayaki, Krishnamurthy, as he was named, began his earliest studies in the local school, later pursuing his education in the Hindu Higher secondary school. His thirst for literature became evident at this stage, for he began to write short stories and essays, under the able tutelage of his Thamizh professor, Periyasamy Pillai.

1921 saw the launch of the Non- Cooperation Movement by Mahatma Gandhi, to which Krishnamurthy, like thousands of other students, responded in earnest by giving up his education and participating in the fight for freedom from the British Raj. In 1922, he was awarded the sentence of one year in prison, during which time he met two people who would provide him with encouragement and enthusiasm all his life: T. Sadasivam and C. Rajagopalachari (Rajaji).

It was during his imprisonment that he produced his first novel, *Vimala*.

During October, 1923, he ascended to the post of Sub-editor in a Thamizh periodical, *Navasakthi*, edited by eminent Thamizh scholar and veteran freedom-fighter, Thiru. Vi. Kalyanasundaram, otherwise known as Thiru. Vi. Ka. The next year saw his marriage to Rukmini, while he translated Gandhiji's *My Experiments with Truth* into the famed *Sathya Sothanai*. He also published his first collection of short stories, titled *Sarathaiyin Thanthiram* (Saratha's Strategy). In 1928, he walked out of *Navasakthi*, and engaged in the freedom movement in earnest. Living for the next three and a half years in the Gandhi Ashram, he was a part of the magazine *Vimochanam* (Release) edited by Rajaji, and it was from this period that his writing skills began to come to the fore. With Rajaji banished to prison, Krishnamurthy wrote rousing essays and short pieces in the magazine, for which he paid the price—another term of imprisonment for six months in September, 1930. Released on March 19th the next year, he took over the editorship of *Ananda Vikatan*, a humour weekly which was swiftly ascending to popularity. From this period, his popularity increased phenomenally.

Writing under the pen-names 'Kalki', 'Thamizh Theni', 'Karnatakam' etc. his witty, precise and impartial essays attracted readers of all walks. His novels and short stories appeared as serialized versions in the magazine, among them, notably *Kalvanin Kadhali* (The Bandit's Beloved) in 1937, which happened to be his first novel, followed by *Thyaga Bhoomi* (The Land of Sacrifice), both of which were made into movies. In 1941, he left Ananda Vikatan to start his own magazine, *Kalki*, in which T. Sadasivam was instrumental.

He wrote *Parthiban Kanavu* (Parthiban's Dream) during this period, one of his first forays into novels based on a historical setting, with members of the Pallava and Chozha Dynasty as its principal characters. In 1944, *Sivakamiyin Sabadham*, one of the best historical novels ever to have been written in Thamizh was produced, for which Kalki (by which name he styled himself)

journeyed to Ajantha and Ellora, so as to add the touch of realism and precision. He also wrote the screen-play for the hit-movie *Meera* starring M.S. Subbulakshmi, the legendary Carnatic singer. 1948 saw the start of *Alai Osai*, a novel set in the era of freedom-fighters, discussing the then political and social situation, and was considered by Kalki to be his best. It won for him the Sahitya Academy Award, posthumously. In 1950, he journeyed to Sri Lanka, which formed the base for his magnum opus, *Ponniyin Selvan*, which, according to many, has none to equal its stature as a superb Thamizh historical novel till date.

Kalki performed many roles with consummate ease during his lifetime; he wrote stirring novels which explored human relationships and social conditions, subjects considered largely taboo in those days, for society was, in general, above criticism and history largely confined to schoolrooms. His writings were in simplified chaste Thamizh, so that they would reach a multitude. He was one of the first writers to add a large humour quotient in his writings—at a time when many authors considered humour beneath their dignity or were unable to project it into their works, Kalki used wit to deliver his sharpest snubs and most pointed criticisms. The effort, not unnaturally, made friends for him even among those he sought to criticise. At a point when the self-esteem of the Thamizh population was at its lowest ebb and honour, to most, consisted of identification with the British regime, Kalki strove to bring Thamizh Nadu's rich history and culture into focus—he was largely responsible for tearing away the cloak of convention around Bharathanatyam, and made it accessible to the common public. Until that time, it had largely been left to the devices of courtesans, and learning it was not considered proper by the general public. Kalki brought the understanding that the Thamizh population had plenty to be proud of.

Kalki relished travelling—his love for the Thamizh countryside, its people, the language and their customs can be found in abundance in almost all his works. He was one of the first authors to promote research and precision in writing, for he actually visited many of the places mentioned in his novels and short stories.

As a freedom-fighter, he was among the most respected in the country—he did much to rouse the people from their self-imposed lethargy and diffidence. Occasional periods of imprisonment did nothing to extinguish his fervour—he made more friends who were willing to join hands in his quest, and his popularity increased.

Small wonder, then, that he is revered by many to be a veritable Leonardo Da Vinci of Thamizh Nadu—for he managed to accomplish much with little.

About Pavithra Srinivasan

Pavithra Srinivasan is a writer, journalist, artist, translator and editor—not necessarily in that order. She is fascinated with History, and

writes children's fiction for adults. Her work has appeared in numerous magazines; she's been a historical-fiction columnist for *Young World*, *The Hindu's* supplement for children. Her column was named *Yester Tales*. She was also an organic farmer on her farm, situated in a tiny village in the Thiruvannamalai District. She's written about her farming adventures in *The New Indian Express*, under the column *How I Met My Farm*. She was movie and music critic for rediff.com, and entertainment journalist with film magazines such as *Southscope*, *Ritz* and *Inbox1305*. She also wrote extensively for Chennai's lifestyle magazine, *Eves Touch*, and worked as Fiction Editor with *Katha India*, a publishing house devoted to translations, where she edited full-length translations of authors such as Jeyakanthan, Sundara Ramasamy, Damodar Mauzo, Imayam and others (one of which made it to the long-list of Crossword Awards).

She's had a column in *Culturama* magazine called *Passage to India*, where she wrote historical fiction for an adult audience. She's written more than a hundred features/stories/interviews for *The Hindu, The New Indian Express, The Times of India, Deccan Chronicle, Chandamama, Gokulam, Prodigy* and other magazines.

She has to her credit a collection of historical short-stories for young adults, *Yester Tales* (Viswakarma Publications, 2017), and another: *Little-Known Tales from Well-Known Times: Back to the BCs, (*Helios Books, 2012*)*; two historical novellas *Swords and Shadows* and *I, Harshavardhana* (Pustaka Digital Media, 2016); the translation of Kalki's epic historicals, *Sivakamiyin Sabadham (*Helios Books, 2012; Tranquebar Press, 2015*)* and *Ponniyin Selvan* (Tranquebar Press, 2014; Zero Degree Publications, 2019; Taar Maar Productions, 2019). The English translation of M Chandrakumar's famed work *Lock Up* has also been done by her: *Lock Up* (Westland, 2017). She has translated Jeffrey Archer's short-story collection into Tamil, *Mudivil oru Thiruppam (*Westland, 2009*)* as also Amish Tripathi's acclaimed *Shiva Trilogy* (Westland, 2014, 2015) in addition to the Tamil version of *Scion of Ikshvaku*, *Ikshvaku Kulathondral* (Westland, 2016) and *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* (Westland, 2018). Yet

another translated work is *They Came; They Conquered* (Zero Degree Publications, 2018) of Writer and cartoonist Madhan. One of her stories is a part of the collection, *My Mom is My Hero*, (Adams Media, 2010) edited by Susan Reynolds.

Pavithra is also a miniaturist—an artist who draws miniatures. She produces accurate representations of historic landmarks; her work on Chennai was featured in various national newspapers such *The New Indian Express*, *The Times of India* and *The Hindu*: http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/chennai/tales-of-chennai-in-words-and-miniatures/article6761045.ece

She's into zentangling, crystal-work and embroidery, as well.

To get regular updates about her work, check out her Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/pavithra.srinivasan

Dedication

To Kalki R Krishnamurthy—who opened my eyes to the wonderful world of history, and guided my first hesitating steps towards the incredible world

of historical fiction. From you I learnt my past; through you, I look to my future.

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Chapter 1

The Banks of Kedilam

Of the many beautiful rivers that pledged natural bounty to Thirumunaippaadi Nadu, the Kedilam occupied pride of place. The elegant shrine that stood witness to saint Appar's glorious union with the illustrious lord of Thiruvathigai Veerattaanam stands on its banks; in close proximity lies Thirunaavalur, whose deity halted Sundaramurthy Naayanar's materialistic progress and steered him gently towards the spiritual. It was between these two holy sites, these *kshethrams* that the *rajapattai* from Thondai Mandalam snaked towards Chozha Nadu and Nadu Nadu, during those times.

The ferry-crossing of said king's road was a perennial hub of activity: *Sadapada*! Birds fluttered wings importantly as they carried on twittering conversation on trees crowding the banks; travelers often made a stop, releasing bulls from harness for a period of protracted freedom, judging the site perfect for an impromptu picnic —the morsels of rice they playfully flung was often snapped up by crows, mid-flight; the rest swallowed by fish jostling cheek by jowl, near the banks. Youngsters clapped enthusiastically at these sights,

yelling a surprised “Ahoo!” at each successful caper, laughing and tumbling in play.

That *Aippasi* saw the Kedilam in extraordinarily heavy floods. The relaxed crowds enjoying sumptuous feasts at noon on the banks were consequently denser; likewise their excitement and commotion —but something, some new noise soon drowned out even their considerable uproar: a great roar upon the road in the distance, pandemonium that made some jump onto the banks in startled surprise to investigate.

To those enterprising picnickers, craning their necks, only a massive cloud of dust was visible. In a few moments, though, the picture grew clearer, revealing elephants, horses, palanquins, standard-bearers and other such accoutrements of a royal procession. Closer—closer —ah! Clearly audible, now, the ushers’ stentorian shouts:

“Hark! Warrior of warriors who entered the Sevur battlefield at twelve—Kopparakesari who beheaded Veera Pandiyan!—Rettai Mandalam’s nightmare; the Lion who stalks their hordes!—Lord of Thondai Mandalam!—Maathanda Naayakar of the Northern Chozha Forces!—Son and Heir to Sundara Chozha Chakravarthy, Emperor of the Three Worlds!—Adithya Chozha Maharaja arrives—make way! Paraak!”

The multitude scattered amidst the trees scrambled wholesale upon Kedilam’s banks in response to these deafening chants echoing in all eight directions—for who could contain their enthusiasm at catching a sight, just one glimpse of their hero?

And so they waited on both sides of the crossing, having cleared the middle with some forethought, despite the overwhelming anticipation.

First, of course, marched the royal ushers, wielders of the *ekkaalam* instrument and then the standard-bearers, all of whom crowded upon the quay in orderly fashion. And then …

… then came three magnificent stallions, trotting side by side, each with a stalwart young warrior erect in the saddle—who, despite the distance, were promptly pointed out with justifiable enthusiasm by the jostling public. “There—the one in the center is Aditha Karikalar—doesn’t that golden crown give him away?” exulted one man. “Ah, how it dazzles when it catches the sun—”

“That’s all *you* know,” scoffed another bystander. “If you’d only seen the legendary Karikal Valavan’s glorious crown upon our prince’s brow—ha, wouldn’t it blind the eye with the brilliance of a hundred thousand suns—”

“Not so, *Thambi*,” corrected one knowledgeable greybeard. “To call it Karikal Valavan’s coronet is just a glorious tradition. In truth, Sundara Chozhar wears the jeweled crown fashioned in the times of Paranthaka Chakravarthy—though for how long, no one knows,” he finished detachedly.

“Everyone’s industriously counting his days,” commented the first. “If you ask me, he’s likely to be a *siranjeevi* and live forever.”

“So he can with my goodwill; the cities—the whole *rajyam* is likely to be at peace as long as there’s breath in his body.”

“Unlikely—Chozha Nadu’s been in turmoil, they say, ever since the news of Ponniyin Selvar’s drowning; every arrival from those parts has been freely prophesying an outbreak of hostilities.”

“Why on earth—? Who exactly are the warring factions?”

“The Pazhuvettarayars and Kodumbalur Velaar are expected to go to battle any moment—in prevention of which the lords are assembling in Kadambur Sambuvaraiyar’s palace. Including Aditha Karikalar.”

“Hush, not so loud—the horses are almost upon us,” cautioned someone. “Did you notice how drawn and haggard the prince looks?”

“And why not, pray? Ponniyin Selvar is beloved to him, and which elder brother wouldn’t mourn his *thambi*’s fate? Not to mention his father’s illness—”

“None of which is exactly unnatural, in our world. No, the real reason for his depression lies elsewhere: Aditha Karikalar wished to lead an invasion against the Rettai Mandalam hordes, but his attempts came to nothing, so—”

“Why, though? Who’s stopping him from trampling our foes?”

“The Pazhuvettarayars, of course. What’s to be done when they refuse to sanction the requisite ammunition, provisions and rations so necessary for any war?”

“All a bunch of invented lies, I tell you,” barged in a newcomer. “No one here knows the real reason for his low spirits.”

“Enlighten us, won’t you, oh omniscient one?” wheedled someone else.

“It’s said that Aditha Karikalar fell madly in love with a Pandiya woman but when he was off fighting the Vada Pennai wars, Periya Pazhuvettarayar swooped in and married the girl out of hand and the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani’s word is now law in Chozha Nadu and ever since, the prince has been like one demented,” finished the newcomer breathlessly.

“It might well be, of course; haven’t our elders always laid down that behind every war is a woman?” quoth another knowledgeably.

“And exactly which of our elders is responsible for that idiotic dictum, I ask you? Arrant nonsense, *Thambi*. Assuming the prince did fall in love, does it make any sense for the woman to turn around and straightaway marry a doddering sixty-year-old? No man of sense would believe every random rumour floating about—”

“Fair enough; I’ll concede that point—if you’ll explain Aditha Karikalar’s single state. What’s the reason, eh?”

“Quiet, all of you—they’re almost here. Wait, if the one on the prince’s right is Parthibendra Pallavan … who’s the other? Vandhiyathevan of the Vaanar clan?”

“What? Of course not—that’s Kandamaaran of Kadambur. Clearly, Sambuvaraiyar felt that an *olai* invitation wouldn’t be enough, and sent his own son as personal escort.”

“Proof, surely, that it’s a matter of great import.”

“A matter that might be political, or matrimonial—one never knows. Still, there’s no doubt that every lord of the realm is sure to do everything to snare the prince; the princess fortunate enough to wed him is bound to ascend the Chozha *simmasanam*, isn’t she?”

Thus conversed the people thronging the banks of River Kedilam, deeply and intrusively interested in the lives and loves of the cavalcade’s principal members.

The three stallions duly arrived at the ferry.

A chariot, rolling decorously behind them, trundled to a stop a little further, underneath an *Arasu* tree. Its occupant was an important personage indeed and a byword for valour: the immensely dignified Malayaman of Thirukkovilur, his years numbering eighty.

Aditha Karikalan, seated majestically upon his horse that edged the river, turned to level his gaze at the old man.

Chapter 2

Grandfather and Grandson

The *kizhavar* having made a gesture, Aditha Karikalan promptly wheeled around his horse and trotted towards the chariot.

“I shall take your leave here I think, Child, and progress towards Thirukkovilur, before which …” Malayaman paused. “ … there are a few important things I should like to discuss. Pray indulge me by tarrying awhile under the *Arasu* tree, over there.”

“As you please, *Thaatha*,” the prince jumped down from his horse obligingly; old man and young strolled towards the raised *maedai*.

“Well, that’s a disaster averted,” Parthibendran, watching the proceedings with narrowed eyes, observed to Kandamaaran. “I was quite nervous, you know, that the doddering *kizhavar* might insist on tagging along all the way—”

“—in which case, I’d planned to dump him into the Vellaaru,” Kandamaran quipped. The two traded glances and gurgled with contemptuous laughter, clearly pleased with their superior wit.

Meanwhile at a little distance, Thirukkovilur Malayaman, Udayaar, Lord and Guardian of Malai Nadu, allowed his eyes to gauge his grandson.

“Twenty-four years … twenty-four years ago were you born, Aditha—in my own palace at Thirukkovilur, and well do I remember the joyous celebrations as though they occurred yesterday. Ah, many were our exalted visitors, both from your clan and mine, kings and chieftains of Chozha Nadu as well as Thondai Mandalam—not to mention the armed forces of each of these lords numbering at least thirty thousand … and the feasts and festivities; the jousts and raucous revelry laid out in their cause! Your father’s coronation paled in comparison to the banquets and amusements upon the occasion of your birth; believe me, when I say that all the priceless treasures gathered in my vaults over a hundred years, since the time of my thrifty ancestors vanished to the last gram within a matter of three days!

“Here, I must tell you that your great grandfather Paranthaka Chakravarthy had arrived in state at Thirukkovilur; so had your *periya thanthai* Kandaradhithar, and your father Sundara Chozhar. Words fail me when I try to describe their exhilaration at the birth of a male heir, for there was no doubt that the ascendency of Chozhas lay in your tiny hands. Then too, your grandfather’s older brothers had no issue: your father was Arinjayan’s only son; a young man of beauty rivalling the God of Love Manmadhan himself—no one had ever encountered such dazzling features amongst either the Chozhas or any of the numerous Thamizh clans … which resulted in a few curiously uncomfortable situations for your father, I must admit: fond *anthappuram* ladies delighted in clothing this most beloved of royal children in female garb, cuddling and caressing him endlessly, often murmuring, *How wonderful it would be if he were a girl*? And as childhood matured into adolescence, it was obvious that kings from

Ilankai in the south to the Vindhyas in the north performed veritable penances to have him as their son-in-law—for, in addition to being a handsome man along the lines of the legendary Archunan and Manmadhan, was he also not the sole heir to the prestigious Chozha throne? In the end, however, that honour was to be mine.

“None of our clan, male or female, has ever earned praise for looks. Men prided themselves upon their battle scars; these were the benchmarks for beauty and as for the women, they counted chastity and virtue as the very essence of loveliness and ladylike behaviour. When it was decided, finally, that a princess from such a clan would wed the most sought-after Chozha prince, Malaya Manadu went berserk with sheer, mind-numbing joy—directly proportionate to the intense resentment and torments of jealousy suffered by rival kings and princes, none of which made the faintest dent in my composure, I assure you, and your parents’ wedding was celebrated with a pomp and ceremony that astonished all three worlds … a celebration too that paled, in comparison with the ones organized in Thirukkovilur upon your birth. And the enthusiastic debates upon the choice of a name for the new prince! Some wished to name you, for instance, after that most legendary of our ancestors, Karikal Valavan; still others desired the name of your grandfather’s elder brother, Rajadithyar; in the end, you were called Aditha Karikalan, commemorating both those exalted warriors.

“Over there—the spire of Thirunaavalur’s temple! The sacred birthplace of none other than Nambi Arurar, Sundaramurthy, one of the divine quartet—and also the famed site of your *periya paattanaar* Rajadithyar’s Chozha encampment, twenty-five years ago. Countless are the tales I have heard of magnificent heroes from our myths and epics; countless the warriors I have seen as well, in this valorous Thamizhagam—but none of the stature of Rajadithyar … and anyone with the tremendous fortune of witnessing his martial skills on the battlefield would say the same.

“As for the motivations behind the galvanized military efforts in this region? A wholesale invasion against the north, at the head of a

massive army—for it was a long cherished dream of Rajadithyar's to annihilate Rettai Mandalam's Kannara Thevan, and raze his famed capital Manyakhedam to the ground. The history of Pallava Chakravarthy Maamallar having marched triumphantly to Vathapi in times long gone, resulting in its successful destruction had fired his ambitions; Manyakhedam ought to suffer a similar fate. Thus would the enemy's outrageous behaviour be quelched—not to mention adding to Rajadithyar's prowess and fame, in the process. But it was no easy task to amass armies towards an invasion of such a stature, surely? After all, Maamallar had been known to gather forces over a period of seven years—but Rajadithyar asserted that he did not need that long; three or four would do. And the best space, a space large enough to assemble and train hordes of massive proportions would be this—the Nadu between the rivers Kedilam and Then Pennai."

"A vast pity that you had not the good fortune to glimpse this region in those times, Aditha—and those who did never, ever forgot, as long as they lived. Rajadithyar at the head of thirty thousand men stationed in Thirunaavalur; the Chera king Vellan Kumaran encamped with twenty thousand warriors in Mudiyur on the Pennai banks while your grandfather Arinjayan and I were in Thirukkovilur, having mustered around fifty thousand for our part. Kodumbalur Periya Velaan; Chozha Nadu's newly minted nuisance, the *saniyan* Pazhuvettarayan, Kadambur's Sambuvaraiyan, this very Thirumunaippaadi Nadu's lord Munayatharaiyan; Mazhapaadi's Mazhavaraiyan; Kunrathur's Kizhaan; Vaithumbaraayan and the rest were all stationed between two rivers with their respective armies, not to mention the three Kaikkola Regiments—and naturally, many were the mock battles staged amongst the various battalions as part of martial training: elephants slammed into one other, the ground shuddering as though in an earthquake; cavalry regiments mounted on blood horses clashed, the din of sword, spear, man and beast akin to the deafening roar of a deluge about to end the world. Countless arrows released during practice sessions blotted out the very skies; the bloodcurdling battle-cries of thousands of warriors preparing as one to lunge at the hated foe: "*Naavalo Naaval*!"

seemed to signify the end times. Not unnaturally, the crowds surging to witness these rare events was nothing short of massive.

“That the citizens of Thirumunaippaadi and Nadu Nadu were noble and courageous cannot be understated—for the hindrances to their cultivation during this period was not inconsiderable, but did they mind? Not at all! Rajadithyar decided that such magnanimity ought to be repaid, and commanded the construction of several large lakes in these two regions, while also making arrangements for the waters from the Kollidam to pour into Veera Narayanapuram Lake through a brand new river … and Aditha, the one who benefited the most from these generous gestures, and the increased natural bounty of the area was none other than Sambuvaraiyan himself. Ah, words fail me when I remember his obsequious manner as he bent at Rajadithyar’s feet in those days and his present conceit borne of wealth—“

“Sambuvaraiyar’s arrogance merits no attention, *Thaatha*,” Aditha Karikalan cut in. “Rather, describe the battle at Thakkolam, won’t you? When did the massive army encamped upon Kedilam’s banks begin to march? And why, despite the meticulous preparations, forethought, mock-battles, painstaking practice and my *periya pattanaar*’s undeniable valour did we lose? You participated in that campaign after all, didn’t you? Doubtless, you were a witness to everything that happened.”

“Indeed … which prompts me to retail those events.

“Aditha, remember when I mentioned Rajadithyar training a great many warriors towards the eventual aim of enjoining battle in distant lands? Despite all his plans, however, the armies could not begin marching within the stipulated period; news arrived of hostilities breaking out in Ilankai at this precise moment and some regiments had to be dispatched there, in the interests of a victorious campaign. The Chakravarthy, for his part, entertained misgivings about tramping all the way north leading a massive army with every courageous, talented commander and soldier in tow while there reared foes in the south by the moment, and called a halt. *Proceed*

once we receive news of victory from Ilankai, came instructions and although champing at the bit, Rajadithyar understood his father's rationale and waited with all the patience he could muster—a patience that was ill-rewarded in the end, for his enemies would not adopt the same virtue: Rettai Mandalam's Chakravarthy, engaged in a similar mission of gathering armies on his own territories, judged the time right to invade Chozha Nadu and began marching south; ably assisting him was his ally, King Boodhugan. Kannara Thevan's massive hordes combined with Ganga forces like the blending of the colossal North sea and the South, descending as an immense walking ocean, a *maha samuthram*—in which swam a thousand giant elephants like whales and tens of thousands of war-horses, like the proverbial *magara* fishes … and it seemed that this phenomenal *sainyam* would drown the southern lands just like the mythical *pralayam*, the last and final deluge that would see all seven seas destroy the world. At least, such were the warnings proffered by stunned spies who had surveyed the approaching armies and sped back like the very wind.

"Not that Paranthaka Chakravarthy was fazed in the least: this, he suggested, was actually a good thing: rather than have our own forces undertake a grueling march over unforgiving terrain and then engage in warfare upon enemy territory, shouldering the strain of a long journey, it was a decided advantage when said enemy could be drawn to our borders where we, with our superior knowledge, could surround them on all four sides and corner the men like rats; the foes had actually marched up to Vada Venkatam, when he finally authorized us to march.

"Rajadithyar waited no more, surging forward at the head of a phenomenal *sainyam* consisting of three lakh infantry men; fifty thousand cavalry warriors; ten thousand war elephants; two thousand chariots; three hundred and twenty commanders and thirty two kings, in all—one of whom was I, fortunate enough to be a part of the campaign … yet, unfortunate enough to return alive.

“Three days of hard march later, two *kaadhams* north of Kanchi, at the site of Thakkolam—clashed the two massive *sainyams*.

“You may have heard, Aditha, tales of the legendary battle between Devendran and Vridhraasuran from our epics—and the one between Raman and Raavanan, as also the renowned Kurukshethram war … but witnesses of gory Thakkolam would swear on all that is holy that those mythical battles were too puny for comparison. Enemy hordes were twice the size of ours; their soldiers estimated around five lakhs and their elephants, thirty thousand—but what of that? Without a Senathipathi boasting Rajadithyar’s martial acumen, Jayalakshmi and Veeralakshmi, the Goddesses of Fortune and Courage seemed firmly ranged on our side.

“Ten days lasted war—ten long, arduous days; impossible to count the dead—corpses of soldiers scattered across the field; lifeless elephants, heaped into dark, immovable hillocks. Casualties might have been heavy on both sides, but it was clear that the enemy had suffered more—the reasons for which they were quick to recognize: Rajadithyar’s reassuring presence upon his majestic mount for where he went, thither went Jayalakshmi as well. Should an arm of the *sainyam* fail or a regiment flag, there would arrive the Chozha commander at once, and the sight of the regal warrior atop his elephant heartened the weariest of men; they fought with thrice-renewed vigour. And our foes, having observed this phenomenon, evolved a truly heinous plot—which was understood only much later, when it was much too late. The one responsible for its creation and fulfillment, from first to last, was the Ganga king Boodhugan.

“Quite suddenly, that treacherous wretch, that *bhaadagan* hoisted the white flag of surrender upon his elephant, raised both hands above his head in surrender and barged right into Rajadithyar’s path, screaming “*Saranam*! Mercy!”—and naturally, our commander, standing nearby, could not but fail to see it. We realized afterwards that his very proximity must have given the idea; Boodhugan doubtless put on this performance having seen Rajadithyar’s *ambaari* … and our beloved Senathipathi, that bravest

of men, that warrior amongst warriors, faltered for a moment, for that feeble cry had touched him. Wishing to know if it was the Rettai Mandalam Chakravarthy himself who desired surrender or just Boodhugan separating himself from his overlord, he blew upon his conch, signaling his personal bodyguards to leave—and gestured to the Ganga king to nudge his elephant close to his own. Boodhugan obeyed, hands still folded deferentially and Rajadithyar, glimpsing his glistening eyes as he approached, felt his heart melt.

"Thozhuda kai ullum padai yodungum—annaar
Azhudha kanneerum anaithu."

"Thus has Thamizhagam's greatest poet warned of enemies who approach with outward humility—but the words had clearly slipped Rajadithyar's memory for Boodhugan's tears had thawed his iron defenses. *Well*? He asked, having beckoned the Ganga king to his side, only to feel his goodwill change to loathing when he heard Boodhugan's honeyed reply: of having seen the changing tides of war; of having been certain of defeat and warning Kannara Thevan to surrender—advice the Rettai Mandalam Chakravarthy rejected out of hand—upon which Boodhugan had had no choice but to leave such a mule-headed suzerain and to throw himself on Chozha mercy … which pleased Rajadithyar not at all, who minced no words in roundly denouncing his decision.

"Even as he ignored the Ganga king's plea and ordered him straitly to return … it happened. Boodhugan carried out his treacherous objective—his terrifyingly heinous task—in the blink of an eye.

"He whipped out a cunningly concealed bow, nocked and released a poisoned arrow which found its unerring way into Rajadithyar's heart.

"Our brave commander fell instantly, but so sudden—so unexpected had it been that those very near did not even realize what had happened until precious moments had slipped away. All they heard was Rajadithyar sternly commanding Boodhugan to go his way—

upon which the Ganga king immediately withdrew and sent his elephant into a scampering retreat!

“The moment news spread of the Chozha prince’s assassination atop his own elephant, it was as though lightning had struck every warrior; each sank into a sorrow that eclipsed all thought of the ongoing war. Commanders, chieftains right down to the last soldier began to lament and mourn, witless … hardly any surprise that the enemy gained the upper hand. Within a while, it was obvious that the scales of war had tipped; our armies were now on the defensive and forced into retreat—has it not always been easy to chase fleeing men? One of whom was my own cowardly self, I admit; our foes encroached upon these very banks—at which point we finally came to our senses; gathered our tattered pride, and made a last, desperate stand. We held off the enemy; I managed to evacuate my family from Thirukkovilur and shepherd them west, into a fort secreted in Malai Nadu. Upon those very slopes I also scrounged an army, with which I launched stray attacks on foes who tarried still. For all that, they refused to budge from Kedilam’s banks and made themselves comfortable—for quite a while, I should say; they persisted in being a thorn in our sides, squatting here and there for years. Why, venerable Kanchi was in their hands; it was only three years ago, when you finally destroyed Veera Pandiyan, marched north and retrieved it that that hoary city finally returned to our keeping—”

“None of which is exactly news to me, *Thaatha*,” Aditha Karikalan interrupted once again. “Still, I can never tire of listening to tales of Thakkolam War and Rajadithyar’s feats … but why bring him up at this time?”

“Child, your *periya paattanaar* cherished grand ambitions of extending the Chozha *samrajyam* from Ilankai to Gangai, but embraced death before he could achieve them; my grandson Aditha Karikalan, this *rajyam* reveres as cut from the same cloth, a warrior no lesser than his ancestor; every citizen of Thamizhagam insists that you shall accomplish in your lifetime what he hoped to … and

so, my boy, I sought to caution you against falling victim to the treachery that claimed him."

"My ancestor lost his life to the evil machinations of enemies upon a battlefield," Adithan smiled wryly. "But why remind me of that now? I'm not on my way to war, after all; neither am I about to meet foes but some of my father's intimate friends. Why, and how would they meditate the slightest treachery upon my person?"

"Hark, Karikala—the same Thiruvalluvar Peruman who instructs us to be on guard against an enemy's tear-bedewed eyes and folded hands, also warns that foes within are much more dangerous than those without.

"Vaalpol pagaivarai anjarka—anjuka
Kel pol pagaivar thodarbu."

One need not fear the enemy confronting us outright like a sword, as much as he ought the one who masquerades as an ally. You, Child are now about to venture amidst foes posing as friends, as *kelir*. You disregard my every warning about such a visit, convinced that you have been asked to mediate negotiations regarding state affairs … amidst all this, reports have reached me of half-baked intentions to foist Sambuvaraiyan's daughter upon you. And yet, Karikala—neither you nor I could possibly guess the truth of this invitation.

"Kings and Emperors of this great land beg to offer you their daughters; a petty chieftain's girl need bind you not. Besides, arrangements are being made in secret, I hear, to achieve some sort of compromise by apportioning this *rajyam* between you and Madhuranthakan … I know not the treacherous motive behind these supposedly benevolent decisions. Whatever the underlying plots and conspiracies, I shall go to Thirukkovilur, rally what forces I can and station myself upon the Vellaaru banks; should you feel the slightest misgiving in Sambuvaraiyan's palace, send me word—!"

At which opportune moment, Malayaman realized that his beloved grandson's attention was riveted not on his involved, eminently cautionary speech—but elsewhere.

"*Thaatha*—over there!" Aditha Karikalan's voice was husky with emotion.

The valorous old man paused and turned to look in the direction his grandson pointed, surprised.

Chapter 3

The Eagle and the Dove

A lone *mandapam* stood upon the riverside where Aditha Karikalan pointed; of stone, constructed long ago, likely by a *dharmavaan*, a Good Samaritan with the creditable intention of providing needy travelers shelter from sun or rain. Clearly a veteran of the elements, the *mandapam* had weathered nature for years and now sported signs of old age. Several chiseled forms decorated its corners; figurines whose features were indistinct to Malayaman's ancient, rheumy eyes.

"You see them, *Thaatha*?" Aditha Karikalan asked.

"The *mandapam*, do you mean? I am afraid I can distinguish nothing of import, Child—it seems empty," the *kizhavar* peered. "I see no one."

"Only now do I truly realize the toll years have taken on you; your sight dims. Look carefully—there—a huge eagle, a *raajaali*! Ah, how vast its wingspan—but oh, the horror—it's clutching a tiny dove between its legs—don't you see them at all? The *raajaali*'s razor-sharp claws have torn the dove—it's bleeding—Good God, *Thaatha*, how amazing! There's another dove, and it's circling the terrifying *raajaali*—oh, how it pleads with the predator—perhaps the captured dove is its mate? Its beloved? Is it begging the hunter to release its prey? To spare the dove … or is it preparing to fight, *Thaatha*? The way its wings flutter makes me wonder if its battle, after all—God, the courage of that pretty female! It's about to plunge into a fight with the fearsome *raajaali* for its mate's sake! Do you think the eagle will relent, *Thaatha*? Do you? No, never—it certainly won't feel a twinge of conscience, of mercy—hasn't it gobbled an hundred such doves in its lifetime? Hasn't it feasted and fattened on

pitiful, pathetic creatures—damn these evil killers—I shall destroy you!" And Aditha Karikalan flung a pebble at the offending creation—which suffered no harm except a dull clang as the stone struck a corner of the *mandapam*—resulting in the pebble clattering to the ground. "Ha—serves you right, you demon!" And he broke into loud, terrifying cackles that almost deafened the ear.

The faint suspicion already germinating in Malayaman's mind about the younger man's faltering equilibrium, now took determined root.

"Why do you stare at me so, *Thaatha*? Do check the *mandapam*, why don't you?"

Malayaman duly obliged, picking his careful way towards the river, and peering at where Karikalan's pebble had struck. There, indeed, was an extremely realistic sculpture of a *raajaali* clutching a dove in its sharp talons, while another dove fluttered nearby as though to swoop upon the larger bird. "The years are telling indeed, Child; my eyesight is not what it used to be," he acknowledged, making a ponderous return. "I realized the truth of your words once I went near, of course; good sculpting, I must say."

"Good? ***Good***, *Thaatha*? Wondrous, amazing work, rather! Doubtless the work of a *chirpa chakravarthy*, a sculptor extraordinaire from the times of Mahendra Pallavar or Maamallar! It looks so lifelike that I was almost deceived into thinking it real," Adithan was in awe.

"It isn't that work of stone that is incredible, Aditha—rather your eye, and your perceptive mind. This path sees a great many travelers each day, but how many do you think spare a glance for such a sculptural wonder? Three quarters would not, while the rest might barely register its presence. Only a few, such as you, with the soul of an artist, would marvel at its nuances—"

"Marvel, *Thaatha*? Hardly! I'm angry—so furious that I'd like to smash it into a thousand shards—in fact, I'm not even sure too much

praise ought to be heaped upon the sculptor who created this terrifying piece—“

“Good God, Karikala, how astonishing to hear these mellow sentiments! When, pray, did your steely warrior heart melt into such a puddle of compassion? It is the *raajaali*’s predatory nature to hunt and consume its prey; should the lion begin to commiserate with the goat, it would no longer be the king of the jungle but a weakling itself. Those desirous of ascending the throne and ruling a nation ought not to feel the slightest compunction in routing out and killing foes and traitors; Chakravarthis with the very world under their authority cannot hesitate to vanquish enemies—surely a *raajaali* that doesn’t kill doves cannot claim the status of a hunter?” Malayaman’s query was tinged with justifiable concern. “Why such anxiety, then?”

“That’s all very well, *Thaatha*—but couldn’t the dove’s suffering spark just the slightest sign of compassion in the *raajaali*? Oughtn’t he to release the male out of pity for the female? Indulge me, *Ayya*: let’s suppose you’re bent on executing a foe and at that precise moment a woman, his beloved puts herself between the two of you—she begs to spare her husband’s life.” Karikalan paused, and swallowed. “What would you do? Wouldn’t—wouldn’t your heart thaw just a little?”

“I shall kick such a female with my left leg and fulfill my mission, Karikala—of that, there cannot be the slightest doubt. Remember the legendary Valluvar’s appropriate words about enemies who conceal weapons within folded hands and bedewed eyes—and the tears of women are particularly dangerous, for their ability to melt hearts is significantly greater. Such a man—a man with a weak, ineffectual heart—can accomplish nothing for he is a frail, puny idiot, even more despicable than a woman!”

“Good God, *Thaatha*—how *could* you? This contempt for females—surely you insult my mother when you subject all women to such scorn?”

“Listen, Child and listen well: nothing in this world can ever equal my love for your mother, and that is the stark, naked truth. Six sons did I sire and phenomenal warriors were they, such as Mahabharatham’s legendary Bheeman and Archunan—and I sacrificed every single one of them upon the battlefield. Not a moment’s grief did I feel at their deaths—but ah, my sorrow when I bestowed my daughter upon your father in marriage, despite the knowledge that her future was upon the *samrajyam*’s glittering throne! Still, did I let myself reveal heart’s distress? No! And did I betray my feelings to your mother? Never! I called her to my side on the eve of her wedding—did you know the essence of my parting words, Karikala? Hark! *Fate has twined your hand with that of a man who will be the toast of an entire kingdom, Daughter—but do not allow yourself the luxury of pride, for such a union shall bring you nothing but misery. The maids in your royal households will lead happier, carefree lives; prepare yourself for endless sorrow and suffering. Should you prove barren, your husband shall wed others; do not betray the slightest hint of anguish. Should you be fortunate enough to beget sons, it is your bounden duty to raise them as unrivalled warriors—warriors for whom you must shed not a tear upon news of their death in battle. Should your husband be of good cheer, so can you; should he be miserable, cheer him up; should he be in ill-health, nurse him—and should he die, follow him into the funeral pyre! Your heart may bleed, but never must your eyes tear—for this is the legacy of virtue, the bounty of Malayaman womanhood, our kula aachaaram*! This sage advice did I impart to your mother and I must admit that she has followed, and enforced these edicts to the letter all these years—for has she not raised you and your brother as peerless princes, warriors without equal, Karikala? Has she not devoted herself night and day to her husband, her *pathi*, ever since he fell ill? Has she not performed the duty of a nursemaid herself? Ah,” Malayaman’s voice rang with satisfaction. “My shoulders swell with pride at having borne such a dutiful daughter!”

“My pride in my mother is no less, *Thaatha*—but lend your ears to this hypothetical situation: a foe approaches my father, sword raised to behead him … now, what would Mother do? Intercede and beg for

her husband's life with tears in her eyes? And what if the foe was known to her as well? What then?"

"Your mother, I am happy to say, would not entertain even the thought of pleading for your father's life, Child. Malayaman's daughters do not dishonour their clans—either by birth or matrimony—through such contemptible conduct. Her husband's foe would be her's, naturally; the very idea of appealing to him would be anathema and so shall weeping in his presence. Should her husband die, so will she, casting herself upon him—or if, by chance she should harden herself to live, it would be for one and only one purpose: revenge upon her deadliest foe!"

Aditha Karikalan was silent for a while after this vehement peroration, his thoughts very far away. "*Thaatha*," he said finally, with a deep, heartfelt sigh. "May I take your leave?"

"Must you?"

"Surely there's no other option? More than half the journey is done, after all."

"Indeed. And I—I argued against this very expedition at first; then, in favour of it, especially after the news about your brother … this visit seemed rather a propitious idea, then. Not that I believe Arulmozhi Varman to be dead—"

"Neither do I."

"There was no news of your father for a period in his life; I do not discount the possibility that Arulmozhi might have been washed ashore an island and will return to us soon, one of these days. Still, I hear that this report has thrown all of Chozha Nadu into turmoil, not to mention your parents; doubtless it is your bounden duty to hasten to them and offer what solace you can … a journey that is best accomplished as the Pazhuvettarayars' friend, rather than foe. Therein lies the motivation for my having consented to your visiting

Sambuvaraiyar—an invitation barred to me, I notice; else, I would have accompanied you."

"You don't really fear for me, do you?" Aditha Karikalan's eyes widened. "I'm not quite such a pitiful creature," he commented wryly.

"You speak to your staunch partisan, *Thambi*. Do I not know your valour; are you not a warrior amongst warriors? And yet … yet, while I shall not hesitate a moment to send you all alone into the den of ten thousand dangerously armed enemies—I shudder to do so towards a woman who might shed copious tears and destroy your equilibrium."

"Sambuvaraiyar's daughter is no expert in such devious arts, to my knowledge—if anything, a most modest maid who blushes to enter the presence of men; so Kandamaaran says. And far be it from me to contract a harebrained, hasty arrangement without my parents' unanimous consent … your own ancient clan possesses two maidens awaiting marriage, if memory serves me right."

"Perish the thought, Karikala. While it is true that my eldest son's two daughters have reached the age of matrimony, not the slightest intention do I have of making them millstones around your neck, as the saying goes. I am the proud recipient of the loathing and hatred of almost every Chozha lord and chief—add this to the equation and I need not describe to you the consequences. If anything, a marriage alliance with Sambuvaraiyar's daughter may not be such a bad arrangement; it might afford me some measure of satisfaction. I am getting on in years after all; my body falters and my mind weakens. Sometimes … sometimes I wonder if I shall never see my beloved grandson again—is this, perhaps the last time my eyes shall gladden at the sight of you? But it is true that my usefulness is at an end; you need new acquaintances who wish you well, above all—wedding Sambuvaraiyar's daughter would not be amiss; I shall welcome it."

“Not even your happiness can force me into such a decision, *Thaatha*.” A pause. “If you must know, my visit to Sambuvaraiyar has no foundation in either friendship or matrimony. You may rest assured about those motives, anyway.” Aditha Karikalan’s tone was rueful.

“What else, then, Child? Surely you can reveal to me your reasons? A few stray words from your companions’ conversation fell upon my ears … from which I gathered that you received an *olai* from that temptress, the *mohini pisaasu* wedded by Periya Pazhuvettarayan, well beyond the wise old age of sixty—and that it was her invitation that prompted you upon a journey to Kadambur. Is all this true?”

Aditha Karikalan nodded. “It is, *Thaatha*.”

“Good God, what times are these? To hear you say such things—listen and listen carefully, my boy: yours is a clan that has thrived, ruled and prospered for over two thousand years, nurturing its descendents just as a plantain tree carefully cherishes its offspring. Some of your ancestors were glorious monarchs with the world at their feet; others were content to administer just Uraiyur and its immediate environs. A few emulated the divine Ramabiraan, persevering the *eka pathini viradham* and stayed devoted to one wife; the rest wedded several women, begetting a score of valorous sons. There were kings who venerated Siva Peruman; princes who worshipped Thirumaal—there were even some who disdained the very idea of religion and rejected both deities and demons … but none of them, not one shouldered the heinous weight of dishonour; no man lusted after another’s wife. Wed as many virgin maidens, unmarried women without the touch of man, Child—your grandfather’s father, the illustrious Paranthaka Chakravarthy married seven—and so can you: but do not, do not, I beg of you, even cast eyes at Periya Pazhuvettarayan’s *mayamohini*!”

“Beg pardon, *Thaatha*, but I’m not guilty of that crime; not even in my wildest dreams could I entertain the idea of smearing either Chozha or Malayaman clans.”

“If that indeed be the case … why accede to her request, Child? Why accept her invitation?”

“I think—I must reveal the truth. Once, I caused her grievous harm; I’m going to make reparations. I mean to beg her pardon.”

“My ears …” Malayaman groaned. “What are my sins that I must listen to these loathsome words? Beg a woman’s pardon? You? Good heavens!”

Aditha Karikalan preserved his silence for a while, head bowed, clearly considering his options. Then, he steeled himself and somewhat haltingly, retailed his experiences of three years ago, beginning with hunting Veera Pandiyan; running him to earth in a secret lair; Nandhini’s frantic intervention pleading for his life; Karikalan’s furious rejection of her plea; the subsequent beheading and finally, the remorse, despair and intense sorrow that had buffeted him ever since—all these he described, in great detail as the narrative progressed. “I’ve never ever been able to wipe that incident from my memory, *Thaatha*,” he admitted, finally. “And I can find no measure of peace until I beg her forgiveness at least—and I will. She, for her part, seems willing to let bygones be bygones; her eagerness to dispel the *rajyam*’s confusion and chaos is very real—which is why she’s invited me here. I shall fulfill my obligations and return to Kanchi as soon as may be possible,” Karikalan reassured. “And then—nothing shall stop me from boarding a ship in search of my brother!”

“Much that I never really understood makes a great deal of sense now,” Malayaman said, slowly. “So do plenty of events whose motives I had never divined, before. But I do realize something, without a doubt.” The old man heaved a deep sigh. “No power on earth can defeat destiny.”

Hidden Meaning and Explanations

“ … there were even some who disdained the very idea of religion and rejected both deities and demons …”

So says Thirukkovilur Malayaman, while explaining the different natures of generations of Chozha kings to his grandson, Aditha Karikalan. Kalki casually describes this sentiment thus ***“Saamiyumillai; Boodhamumillai…”***

A popular idiom often used to baldly describe the concept of atheism, it literally means: *Neither God, nor demons*. That such phrases existed and were widely used, describes the inclusive nature, the tolerance, and broadmindedness of Thamizh society.

Chapter 4

The Ayyanaar Shrine

Even as grandfather and grandson were fathoms deep in conversation on the banks of the Kedilam, our friends of old Azhwarkkadiyaan and Vandhiyathevan were engaged in a rather bizarre mission in Thirukkaanaattumullur, a village on the northern banks of River Kollidam, also known as Vada Kaveri, and considered in those times as sacred as the Kaveri herself. Devotees gathered in vast numbers for a holy immersion each day during the auspicious month of Thula, and were granted the chance to worship at the feet of Kaanaattu Mullur's Siva Peruman in procession upon the banks as *Idabaarudar*, upon his divine bull; every afternoon was a full-fledged festival on its own merit, a veritable *urchavam* which saw people thronging from surrounding villages. The Vishnu Aalayam, despite its smaller stature was of some renown as well, with the Lord similarly granting audience in a grand procession upon the King of Birds, the *Garuda Vaahanam*.

It was this considerable crowd that Azhwarkkadiyaan had chosen to exploit, as he stuck a *naaval* tree-branch amidst the eagerly jostling men and women. "*Naavalo naaval—naavalo naaval*!" He screamed at the top of his lungs. "I am come, good people, with the creditable intention of engaging in verbal warfare, to establish the superiority of the Vaishnavite faith in this land of the *Naaval*. All are welcome to debate—Saivites; Saakthars; Advaithis; Kaapaalikars; Kaalaamukars; Buddhists, Jains—anyone! Should they win, I shall acknowledge defeat by carrying them around this village upon my shoulders—but if they don't, they ought to hand over everything except the cloths at their waists!" Azhwarkkadiyaan announced in stentorian tones. "*Naavalo naaval*!"

In front of him rested a commendable mound of *rudraksham* strands; *makarakandi* jewelry; *kaman dalam* vessels; *kundalam* ear ornaments; richly embellished silk cloths and handfuls of gold coins—winnings, clearly, from a great many successful debates and vanquished foes. Nearby, leaning nonchalantly against a sturdy *Kadamba* tree, sword unsheathed was Vandhiyathevan. Judging by the simple cloth at his waist and a dagger, he had driven a good many of Azhwarkkadiyaan's would-be assailants with a threatening display of force—a fact proven by his declaration at an approaching group of vociferous Saivites.

"Hear ye—hear ye! Those desirous of engaging in fair debate are welcome by all means—but be warned: lay a finger on this Vaishnavite against the rules, and find yourselves mincemeat to my blade!" The broadsword was twirled twice with a flourish for added impact, and the wrathful Saivites suddenly assumed a mien of preternatural calm.

"Do not swell with arrogance at your verbal victories, O Vaishnavite!" shrieked one. "Go thou to Thirunaaraiyur—and you will meet your nemesis; Nambiyaandaar Nambi shall trounce your arguments and make you turn tail!"

"You'd better urge your precious Thirunaaraiyur Nambi into debate with Anandha Battar of Thirunarayanapuram," Azhwarkkadiyaan crowed. "Who knows—you might even find me there!"

There being no new takers for further debates despite repeated calls and snide invitations, Azhwarkkadiyaan pulled the *naaval* branch and stuck a staff in its place, this one proudly flaunting Vishnu's

conch and discus. A few Vaishnavites, avid spectators of the entire scenario scampered forward at once and raised him onto their shoulders.

“Narayanan, our one true God;
Let us all sing His praises, our Lord!”

Rang the jubilant verse in loud, raucous tones, after which they respectfully petitioned the victorious debater: “Kindly grace our home and partake of a meal, Brave Vaishnavite!” Azhwarkkadiyaan’s reply —“May it be so!” was the epitome of suave triumph, after which both Nambi and Vandhiyathevan promptly took the Vaishnavites at their word and feasted richly on hot, sour tamarind rice; sweet, treacly *thirukkannamudhu* and creamy *thathiyonnam*, mushy curd-rice, almost bursting their considerable stomachs in the process.

Azhwarkkadiyaan was equally quick to exchange his winnings—except for one *peethaambaram*, a silk garment generously set aside for an *angavasthram* and given to Vandhiyathevan for safekeeping—with the Sri Vaishnavites, receiving their worth of gold pieces; his reasons for such an acquisition of wealth he gave out as a pilgrimage as far north as Haridhwar, with the creditable intention of establishing the peerless virtues of the Vaishnavite faith along the way. His generous hosts’ magnanimity, spurred by this laudable aim, supplied more than his belongings’ worth for which Azhwarkkadiyaan and Vandhiyathevan proffered their thanks and set out for Kadambur, late that afternoon.

The already vast Kollidam’s roaring deluge had made ferrying their horses impossible; their boat, already beyond its capacity, capsized before it reached the north shore. Vandhiyathevan, flapping desperately in the floodwaters like the rest somehow swam ashore, but the damage was done: his waistcloth and its precious contents which he had guarded for days, at such cost—the signet rings and Ilaiya Piratti’s *olai*—were now the river’s exclusive property, not to mention his store of gold coins. It was in the hope of purchasing new mounts that they had hit upon the strategy of religious debate;

one that paid off admirably, but with mixed results: not a horse could be had for love or money in those rural, sometimes semi-forested parts. Kadambur village, with its weekly *sandhai*, the market, might offer a steed—else, it would have to be Thiruppaathiripuliyur.

Fierce argument erupted between the friends: would a visit to Kadambur prove any use? What about the pros and cons, pray? Details of Aditha Karikalar's projected visit might be in the offing; surely one could learn if he had left Kanchi and if so, his prospective route? Not that the Kadambur expedition was not fraught with danger: they would have to avoid old acquaintances, especially Kandamaaran. As for the Pazhuvettarayars, perish the thought! Running into even their retinue—assuming they had already arrived—would prove fatal.

"You're an expert at nocturnal climbs over walls, aren't you?" Vandhiyathevan suggested, not without a sly grin. "Why not drive out a couple of horses from Sambuvaraiyar's stable while you're at it?"

"I could—provided *they* jump over walls as well," was Azhwarkkadiyaan's swift sally.

"If only the Pazhuvoor retinue were there," Vandhiyathevan sounded aggrieved. "I could've snapped two horses from right under their noses! After all, they hounded mine in Kadambur once, remember? I swore to get even with them and I shall!"

Conversation swerved to their unexpected meeting months ago and its bizarre consequences; the friends lost themselves in reminiscences, finally reaching Kadambur at dusk—a Kadambur in a ferment of excited commotion, just as they had foreseen.

The royal palace and gates were gaily festooned with flags, buntings and long, scented garlands; both fortress and entrance were guarded much more heavily than before—for was not the crown prince, Aditha Karikalar himself about to grace the precincts? Not to mention *Dhanaadhikaari* Periya Pazhuvettarayar and his consort,

both parties accompanied by their respective, extensive entourages. Hardly a surprise that the town was thrumming with energy and would continue to do so, for the next few days.

The friends strolled in companionable silence, listening idly to the gossiping crowds in Kadambur's market street—from which it was obvious that neither royal party had arrived, yet. Word, further, was that Sambuvaraiyar had journeyed as far as Kanchi in company of his son, with the intention of personally escorting the prince home. And amidst all this excited talk were low, muted murmurs of the "drowned prince," Arulmozhi Varman—a true catastrophe which did not quite justify celebrations and revels of such vast proportions; surely it was all in rather bad taste? Such were the sentiments of a considerable percentage of the populace—not that they dared voice their revulsion, resorting, instead, to camouflaged conversations referring to no one in particular.

Azhwarkkadiyaan and Vandhiyathevan cut across the area, giving no sign of having observed local opinion; neither wished to dawdle in the town proper—surely they might find a ruined *mandapam*, an inn or some sort of *chaavadi* in the vicinity? Else, far better to continue towards Veera Narayanapuram; the spacious hundred-pillared *mandapam* in its massive Thirumaal shrine would be more than comfortable. A night's undisturbed sleep seemed a necessity, after the turbulence of the night before.

A dense, bristling bamboo copse—a quaint Ayyanaar shrine nestling within—just outside Kadambur, as they stumbled along the road and Vandhiyathevan came to a stop. "Not a step more, Vaishnavite; I'm spent," he groaned. "Let's just bed down in this temple. We're not likely to be observed."

"Wrong, *Appane*," Azhwarkkadiyaan quipped. "So sure, are you, that others might not be struck by the same, wonderful idea and join us?"

"They'd better arrive with steeds then," Vandhiyathevan yawned.

“Even humans might find it difficult to thrust themselves into this bamboo thicket; what price horses?”

“There ought to be a trail somewhere—surely the *poosari*, the priest needs to perform devotions?”

The duo circled the almost impenetrable coppice—and yes! Finally, a narrow, faint trail that made traversing a herculean task as they inched gingerly through prickly branches. A little of this and soon a clearing appeared, with a small Ayyanaar shrine. In front was a *bali peedam*, a sacrificial altar and by the side were arranged row upon row of elephants and horses—kiln-roasted mud creations, offered to the divine Ayyanaar by pious devotees for the fulfillment of various holy pledges, according to ancient custom.

“So much for worrying about stallions,” chuckled Vandhiyathevan. “A petition to Ayyanaar and the deed’s done.”

“Aye; you’ll ford a river on one of those muddy creatures, I suppose,” Azhwarkkadiyaan grinned. “Forgotten the proverb?”

“Ah, thou faithless Vaishnavite,” Vandhiyathevan uttered a mock warning. “You underestimate our Ayyanaar, a powerful deity capable of granting any boon instantaneously—quite unlike your precious Vishnu, content to let His devotees shriek for help while He sleeps away the day!”

“Powerful enough to bring these mud horses to life, think you?” Azhwarkkadiyaan played along. “A marvelous solution to our problem, not to mention free into the bargain.”

“True devotion ought to inspire life in the lifeless, you know—come to think of it, what of our own nerves and veins? Surely they’re nothing but Brahmmadevar’s creations fashioned of mud and infused with soul?”

“Ah, well said, *Thambi*; a fact so forgotten that our saintly Vaishnavite Acharyas have ordained that we adorn ourselves liberally with the sacred *thirumann*, and—”

“Ssh!” Vandhiyathevan grabbed Nambi’s hand and pointed silently, with the other. The sun had vanished beneath the horizon some time ago; twilight was deepening—and the feeble illumination in a clearing surrounded by dense bamboo bushes, revealed some movement.

Ayyanaar’s mounts seemed to have come to life, and shifted places. Specifically, an elephant and a horse each.

Even as Vandhiyathevan stood stupefied, wondering if this spectacle was real or a fantastic figment of his imagination, his fertile brain could not resist the opportunity to prove the truth of Ayyanaar’s divine powers to a frankly skeptical Azhwarkkadiyaan. Before his sibilant whisper of “Vaishnavite, did you see—” could continue, however, it was Azhwarkkadiyaan’s turn to clutch the younger man’s hand tight and touch a finger to his lips in the universal code for silence. He continued his bizarre behavior by practically dragging Vandhiyathevan behind a particularly dense bamboo bush, concealing them both perfectly.

Elephant and horse shifted places, didn’t they? A human head appeared in the empty space—a head that stared around in all four directions.

A horrifying sight, this; as though decapitated right by Ayyanaar’s sacrificial altar, eyes popping out. Even Vandhiyathevan, inured by this time to the terrors of life, or so he imagined—could not help but shudder … but the realization that Azhwarkkadiyaan, whose hand still held his in a crushing grip did not betray the slightest fear or weakness, was somewhat heartening.

The head rose, revealing to the hidden observers a torso and then out clambered a man, exposing something beneath—a small, inky

hole underground; a *piladhvaaram*, a yawning pit of terror. A few moments of intense scrutiny and our friends recognized the newcomer: Idumbankaari, one of Ravidasan's cohorts, also masquerading as a Kadambur palace servant.

Vandhiyathevan and Azhwarkkadiyaan traded a swift glance of astonishment the moment realization hit.

Idumbankaari left the hole open for the present and stared around once more, before making his way purposefully towards the Ayyanaar shrine, opening its door and disappearing inside. *Minuk, minuk* flickered chinks of light in moments; our duo understood that lamps had been lit.

"Well, *Thambi*?" Azhwarkkadiyaan muttered. "Your opinion?"

"Ayyanaar is a remarkably powerful deity indeed," Vandhiyathevan replied seriously. "Didn't you see the horse come alive?"

"Eh? Oh, that. What of the one who appeared just now?"

"Ayyanaar's *poosari*, perhaps. Care for some devout worship?"

"Stay—others might have the same intention."

"You expect more visitors?"

"Why else would this one light lamps?"

"Why wouldn't a priest do so?"

"You really don't recognize him, do you?"

"Certainly I do—the one who supplied me with a horse on Kollidam's south banks; Idumbankaari, of course. I wonder if I can ask him to repeat the service—"

“Good God, what a scheme!”

“You don’t approve?”

“He isn’t just a horse-procurer, but one of Ravidasan’s rogues as well.”

“I’ve a better idea, in that case.”

“Pray, tell.”

“As long as beloved Idumbankaari is busy prostrating at Ayyanaar’s feet, why not explore where he suddenly sprouted from?”

“And you’d accomplish this how, exactly?”

“Surely I could enter the hole he exited?”

“You could, but the danger—”

“—without which there’s no worthy mission, ever.”

“As you please, then.”

“You’d better observe the proceedings from here, Vaishnavite.”

“Hardly a difficult task; of course I shall. But you—any idea about where the secret passage might lead?”

“I do indeed, *Swami*—and I wish to confirm my suspicions.”

“To what end, exactly?”

“It might prove useful at some point. Who knows?”

Several different voices drifted from a distance at this moment, and Vandhiyathevan straightened.

“No more time to waste; you’ll remain until I return, won’t you? Or serve a bad turn as Sukreevan did to Vaali and seal the entrance?”

“I shall stay as long as there’s life in my body—but what’s the guarantee that you’ll return?”

“I shall—if there’s life in this body.”

Vandhiyathevan was moving as he spoke; four great bounds and he was at the hole, descending within, and had vanished within moments into its inky depths—it seemed the *piladhvaaram* simply swallowed him whole.

It stayed open, its gaping maws a terrifying spectacle when Idumbankaari walked out of the shrine, stared around and spotted it. Instantly he strode towards the spear, the *soolayudham* stuck in the ground by the altar, gripped it and gave a hard twist.

The displaced elephant and horse moved back into place; the hole closed—as though it had never been!

His task finished, Idumbankaari returned to the entrance at which moment Ravidasan, Soman Saambavan and a few others arrived from another direction.

Azhwarkkadiyaan secreted himself further, into the bamboo thicket.

Ravidasan made himself comfortable upon the shrine’s steps, while the rest huddled before him on the earthen floor. “My colleagues—friends! The fulfillment of our sacred vow approaches as we speak!”

“So you’ve been declaring for the past six months,” snapped an impatient one. “*Approaches—approaches* is all we’ve heard, so far.”

“Not far wrong either, for the hour of success has indeed drawn close over the past six months and now—now a mere handful of days.

News is that Aditha Karikalan has started from Kanchi; no effort of Thirukkovilur's doddering old idiot to stop him worked."

"Where's the guarantee that no one else will try?"

"Karikalan isn't the type to heed anyone; nor is he likely to halt what's begun."

"What of his sister's message? If he should receive it—"

"Unlikely, considering we left the messenger well and truly trussed up in the jungle—"

"Here's a pretty tale, for I caught sight of him just this morning on Kollidam's north banks in company of our old foe—"

"What? Who?"

"The Vaishnavite fraud!"

"We've to be extremely careful then, and make sure they don't have the chance to meet Aditha Karikalan."

"As well let go the cow's rope and flail to catch the tail. Instead of hacking him into pieces then and there, we had to watch while the Rani let him prance to safety—"

"I confess, my friends, that I misunderstood her motivations then—but I don't, now, and freely admit that her intelligence has far surpassed mine," Ravidasan exulted. "She's spared his life for a most important purpose; not that you need know her reasons now. Vandhiyathevan shall cause you no anxiety, but should you come across that Vaishnavite, kill him without second thought and go about your business."

Hidden Meanings and Explanations

Mud Horses

"*Mann kudhiraiyai nambi aatril iranga koodaathu*," is the proverb Azhwarkkadiyaan quotes, while chatting with Vandhiyathevan at the Ayyanaar shrine. Although here it literally is a pun about crossing rivers upon mud horses, there's another, deeper warning: Not to engage on a serious, or even a dangerous enterprise with weak, untrustworthy allies.

Catching a Cow's Tail

"*Thumbai vittu vaalaip pidippadhu*," is how Ravidasan's cohorts put it, referring to capturing Vandhiyathevan in Kadambur. While the oft-used interpretation refers to overlooking easy methods in solving any problem, regretting it and then falling back on the most complicated manner possible, the literal meaning is a little more earthy and interesting: cows even these days are reined with a rope through their nose; literally a nose-rope, or a *mookanaangkayiru*. In olden times, this rope used to be made of twisted hay—rather messy, with bits and pieces sticking out. This was the proverbial *thumbu*, and so the saying was born: Letting go of a cow's nose-rope, and trying to catch it by the tail, a vastly difficult exercise.

Chapter 5

The Sinister Vault

Having successfully slithered into the dark *piladhvaaram*, Vandhiyathevan descended the stairs—after which the gradient leveled out; faintly illuminated too. Ten or fifteen steps; suddenly, a rattling, grinding noise like a rolling wheel—and inky blackness enveloped him in a moment.

Doubt seized him at once; he remembered his oft-taken, creditable resolution—of never interfering in business that wasn't his. *What of my mission*, he mused. *What an important task—and what am I doing here, creeping into a gloomy tunnel? Where does it lead, I wonder? And what other dangers await me at the end? What an absolutely ridiculous enterprise—and when on earth am I going to control my hasty, thoughtless impulses*? Reflections such as these made him falter in his tracks. Suddenly deciding on retreat, he turned back, even stumbling on the steps he had come down—but the hole above was missing, somehow. There was no locating the *dhvaaram* no matter how he scrabbled around, feeling along the walls—and soon, Vandhiyathevan was perspiring with panic. Desperate to leave, he tried to pry open the sealed exit with all the force he could muster—only to hear faint echoes of voices from far away. Several voices. Perhaps near the *piladhvaaram* itself, by the Ayyanaar shrine? After all, hadn't Idumbankaari lit lamps in expectation of visitors? They would seem to have arrived—in which case, discovering the exit and emerging out of the hole at this precise moment might prove a monumental miscalculation. And who knew the length of their so-called conference? Were they to be Idumbankaari's scheming cohorts headed by Ravidasan, there was no saying how long they might tarry. Why gather here anyway? And what was the subject of this secret discussion? What treacherous, devious conspiracy? Doubtless, the Veera Vaishnavite would be observing all from his hiding-place … *which makes my presence here, sweating like a pig, heaving and struggling to breathe, redundant. I may as well proceed. I've gathered my courage and jumped into this hole—surely it makes sense to follow the secret passage to its destination …*?

Having come to this conclusion, Vandhiyathevan retracted the foot placed in retreat, and resumed his journey forward. The ground, despite a nominal flat surface, was yet bumpy and pot-holed; he wondered if the passage had been carved out of solid rock. Some idea of where it would end had already germinated in his mind—the likeliest possibility being Sambuvaraiyar's palace. But where exactly within, though? The treasure vault, perhaps? Or the *anthappuram*, the especial haunt of the royal women? Common knowledge, after all, that secret passages often existed within the living quarters of kings and lords; the *anthappuram* was usually a safe bet as, in perilous times when a speedy exit from the palace was necessary, the women were bundled out first. And since the most valuable of treasures needed to be safeguarded, passages like these wended their way through treasure vaults as well. *I wonder where this one goes? Considering that Idumbankaari used it, likely the treasury. It isn't outside the realm of possibility that these conspirators, having found Periya Pazhuvettarayar's own vault a lucrative source of income through the Ilaiya Rani, might be planning to swindle Sambuvaraiyar as well.*

But why engage in such a clandestine activity at the very moment of the arrival of Aditha Karikalar and the rest? Could there—could there be other motives? Memory surfaced of the snatches of conversation and scenes he'd unwittingly witnessed in the Thiruppurambiyam Pallippadai; Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani's dazzling sword inscribed with a fish flashed before his mind's eye. Vandhiyathevan shivered, for a moment. Perhaps their devious purposes extended to a little more than burgling the treasury? Confirming the tunnel's destination would prove valuable, even if only to prevent their ominous plot from reaching completion.

The secret passage seemed to meander endlessly; to Vandhiyathevan, plodding along, it seemed as if he had walked for hours though, in reality, it had likely been no more than a few minutes. Lack of air meant that the atmosphere was stifling; perspiration flowed like a river. A sort of stunned exhaustion threatened to overpower him at first, as he calculated the distance

between the Ayyanaar shrine and Kadambur palace—but then, he corrected his assumption: the distance had been, and seemed considerable, as they'd followed snake-like, winding streets from the fortress gates, alleys and lanes curving in and out and then later, forest tracks. The path straight from the palace's rear to the shrine itself was not likely to be this long—perhaps straight as an arrow. In which case, surely he ought to have neared the outer fort wall by now …

Indeed, he had. *Gup*!—a burst of cool air from somewhere far above and to Vandhiyathevan, sweating and heaving until he was on the verge of losing consciousness, it was a new lease of life. He gazed up, to distinguish faint illumination, along with snatches of conversation. Likely one of the battlements dotting the fortress, meant for sentries on guard duty; the construction was such that a cunningly concealed duct allowed space—but only for ventilation and not humans, Vandhiyathevan observed.

Enthusiasm and energy flooded him anew, as the blowing wind led to realization that he had finally entered the Kadambur palace precincts. The end of the secret passage was doubtless close—but would it be the treasury? And would Sambuvaraiyar have emulated Periya Pazhuvettarayar and heaped his subterranean caverns with pearls, coral, precious stones, diamonds and gold? Would there be a gangly skeleton here too, sprawling nonchalantly over the mounds of *aiswaryam*, of wealth? Cobwebs spreading delicate strands over coins?

Something stubbed his toe and Vandhiyathevan, lost in reverie, stopped short, startled. Then, his spirits rose—for the sudden impediment turned out to be steps. Oh yes, there was no doubt that he'd find himself in the treasury once he ascended them. Or the *anthappuram*, bursting with royal ladies, in which case his case would be desperate indeed—ah, Kandamaaran's young sister Manimekalai! She'd be there, wouldn't she, that dark-skinned beauty? A smile edged his lips as his thoughts ran, unwitting, to his naïve intention of marriage with that maiden, once. Not that there

was anyone to compliment his smile—good God, what if he suddenly appeared amongst all those women when they were at ease, or in a state of undress … he almost chuckled at the irreverent thought.

Laughter—but paralyzed with panic the next instant; his blood froze; heart stopped; eyes nearly popped out—at the fearsome, horrifying sight that confronted him. He climbed the stairs, didn't he? On the last step he paused and stared around, realizing that there was no further to climb, and tried to get his bearings.

A hundred, two hundred eyes, bloodshot, eerie eyes stared back at him—the alarming, terrifying eyes of jungle animals!

A moment's sheer, unadulterated terror made him turn; he'd taken a step back—only to discover that the passage had vanished. Some sound there'd been when he took the first upward step—perhaps it had closed automatically? But the gut-wrenching horror awaiting him here!

Massive jungle tigers; leopards; lions; bears; wild bison; wolves; jackals, rhinoceros! Good God—there were even two elephants—*and all are about to spring upon me! Why haven't they, though? Oh look—a huge eagle—and then a giant owl—a man-eating bat! I'm not dreaming am I, or … wait, is that a crocodile? Sprawled on the ground, hideous teeth in gaping maw? Surely the water is their habitat? Then how could it lie here, amidst beasts of the jungle—*

"Oh, thank God," Vandhiyathevan exclaimed aloud, suddenly realizing that the fantastic, terrifying specimens surrounding him were just that: specimens, none of them alive. Something Kandamaaran had mentioned about his family now surfaced in his memory—of the entire clan being hunting-mad … and preserving the skins of several prestigious kills, stuffing them with cotton and hay, finally displaying the creatures in a most realistic fashion within a *vettai mandapam*, a chamber of hunting trophies for their edification—and it was into this that Vandhiyathevan had stumbled;

despite the relief that came with comprehension, the after-effects of utter panic meant that his body still trembled for a while.

The last vestiges of fear falling away, he stepped up to peer at each animal. Touched them. Moved them. Even stomped on them. And stepped back eventually, convinced that they were lifeless. Then, he began to ponder his situation. The way he'd arrived was barred—but could he try to stumble on to it and make a return? Or discover the location of this God-forsaken *mandapam* within the Kadambur palace complex? Find out if another passage snaked from here into another chamber? He began a slow expedition, hands feeling the walls for a door—but nothing. Frustration and anger rose as the minutes passed. *How could I have allowed myself to get caught in such an impossible tangle*, he fumed, wrath building up swiftly to an explosion—and then … he came across the face of an elephant, complete with trunk and tusks, flush against the wall.

"To hell with you, stupid thing," he growled softly. "I wouldn't be in this prison if you hadn't moved aside, would I?" The pachyderm preserved a stony silence, however. When even those with life will not speak, how then can a specimen, stuffed with fibre and chaff? And so the elephant stood mute, not even a whisker of movement in its trunk.

"Well?" Vandhiyathevan demanded, roused to magnificent, mocking fury. "Answer me, you dumb dolt!" He grabbed hold of the tusks, and twisted hard—only to stand stupefied at the magical scene that unfolded.

The elephant's ear, snug by the wall, flapped a little.

Not stopping with that, it folded—and slid aside, revealing a large hole. Consumed by curiosity, Vandhiyathevan leaned close to the *dhvaaram* and peered through, to see—

A young woman's face.

Lovely too—a dark beauty. Two large, limpid eyes opening up even further in surprise, training their level gaze upon him. Wonder of wonders! Vandhiyathevan found his own face very close to hers—not unlike a lover, about to caress his beloved's cheek with his own. Leaning in for a kiss.

The maiden's glittering eyes now widened beyond belief with unspeakable astonishment—astonishment tinged with the slightest fear, to tell the truth. Even as she stared, her luscious red lips, red as corals, puckered to utter a "Coo!" of wonder.

Suddenly seized by panic, Vandhiyathevan released his hold on the elephant's tusks …

… upon which wall and animal returned to their original, featureless, stationary state.

No *dhvaaram*, and certainly no damsel either.

Not even the shrill *Coo*! that had trilled into his ears like the buzzing of a bee.

It took a few moments before Vandhiyathevan's hammering heart steadied, somewhat, to its normal rhythm.

He stood still, lost in thought about the tableau he had just witnessed.

Chapter 6

Manimekalai

Sambuvaraiyar's daughter Manimekalai was a byword for liveliness. Neither her parents nor Kandamaaran had ever treated her with anything but the most profound love and tenderness since childhood—and now, as a young woman, she ruled the Kadambur palace with a rod of iron; a veritable tyrant; a ruthless dictator—her every word was nothing less than a command.

Until recently, her life had been an endless, joyous celebration; a long revelry interspersed with song, dance and playful interludes—until a jarring interruption four months ago: the elders of her household had suddenly begun to behave rather ridiculously, insisting that she do something against her wishes … and not all Manimekalai's efforts to knock sense into them that *Stubbornness serves no purpose*, budged them an inch.

The last two or three years of Kandamaaran's war service had seen him return with extraordinary tales about a certain Vallavarayan Vandhiyathevan. His friend's valour and courage were unequalled, he raved; his intelligence unparalleled. Not even Manmadhan, the legendary God of Love could match his looks; nor Archunan his martial prowess, Kandamaaran praised to the skies, and as for his superior strategic skills—could even the divine Krishna Bhagavan compare? "He's the right husband for you," Kandamaaran would crow with ill-concealed glee. "The kind of man to curb your wildness; you need a firm hand, my girl."

Despite an overwhelming desire to listen to more such diatribes, Manimekalai's retorts to her decidedly overbearing brother were always drenched in annoyance. "So much for all these fantastic speeches," she taunted, whenever she could. "Invite that paragon home, won't you? I could match my wits against this walking tower of virtues!"

"You just wait, dear sister," Kandamaaran swore, mock furiously.

Such teasing conversations were not without consequences; Manimekalai's fertile imagination drew as complete a picture of Vandhiyathevan as it could and soon she was engaging with his non-existent self, talking, laughing, singing snatches of songs, staging mock-battles and effecting emotional reconciliations; indulging in beautiful daydreams, substantial as wisps. Sometimes, she deigned to throw open her wonderfully wrought castles in the air to willing, subservient friends who listened to her prattling of her elder brother's marvelous friend, the wonderful Vaanar warrior, with a very gratifying assumption of interest.

It was this glorious interlude; these cotton clouds of fairy dreams that suffered an unexpected interruption, some four months ago.

Kandamaaran's hitherto praiseworthy tone began to undergo a change: at first subtle and later, unmistakably hostile. "Forget that orphan without home, family, position or status," he insisted, suddenly portraying to her a vastly different future: upon the throne of Thanjavur. Her family had chosen brighter prospects for their daughter, he wheedled. Later, one fine day, he explained matters as they stood, without prevarication: she would be joined in matrimony to Madhuranthaka Thevar, already the husband of Chinna Pazhuvettarayar's daughter. Her future husband, he managed to convey obliquely, would also be Chozha Nadu's future king and as his consort, Manimekalai would be the resplendent Chakravarthini of all three worlds and as for her son—ah, wouldn't he perhaps be contender for the throne himself, in turn? Such were Kandamaaran's rosy visions and his parents joined the chorus as well, content with the picture their son painted.

Everyone agreed that it was the perfect destination for a well-bred princess … everyone, that is, except Manimekalai who, having listened to countless tales of Vandhiyathevan, had lost her heart to him. Not to mention all she had heard of Madhuranthakan himself, allegedly an austere ascetic draped in

sacred *rudraksham* necklaces; a coward who had never set foot in a battlefield—and married, to boot!

Thanjavur's royal ladies, she fumed, were arrogant in the extreme; convinced of their superiority in fashion, culture and the preserve of well-bred women, they spared not a thought to those from other fiefdoms, dismissing them without a qualm. Such outrageous manners to be condoned, nay, assumed by her, Manimekalai—good God! The very possibility was infuriating. Not for the glittering Thanjavur throne; not even the heavenly seat of Devendran could she submit to matrimony with Madhuranthakan—and that was that.

Her resolve strengthened upon receipt of another piece of news: Periya Pazhuvettarayar's entourage to Kadambur had included Ilaiya Rani Nandhini, or so she had been told—but said Rani neither entered the *anthappuram* nor made the acquaintances of the royal ladies; a fact that first caused surprise, and then a good deal of derisive and insulting talk amidst said ladies. Then, bit by tempting bit, the truth trickled out: the occupant of the Pazhuvoor queen's closed palanquin had in fact been Madhuranthakan—and what little was left of Manimekalai's good impression melted away. "To wed a coward masquerading as a woman, creeping about in closed palanquins? *Chee*!" Manimekalai muttered to herself, disgusted beyond belief. "Never!"

Madhuranthakan's skulking entrance into Kadambur had coincided with another's obvious one: Vandhiyathevan. The latter's presence in the *anthappuram* had been of a very short duration—but Manimekalai, debilitated by overpowering shyness, concealed herself behind the rest of the women. Not even daring to see him face to face—to meet his eyes … but those half-glances, the brief, snatched glimpses had etched indelibly, in her heart, his charming countenance, smiling eyes and charismatic features; his voice and few random utterances were imprinted upon her memory.

And so, it began all over again: her spirited arguments with brother Kandamaaran—arguments that insisted, always, that not even the

most divine Three-Eyed Siva Peruman could persuade her into marriage with Madhuranthakan.

Manimekalai also managed to convey—covertly, of course—that despite having seen Vandhiyathevan only a few scant moments, her heart belonged irrevocably to him.

The declaration sent Kandamaaran into flights of unbelievable fury.

In fairness to him, the weapons he took up at first were verbal, prompted largely by fond indulgence—a tactic that failed spectacularly. “Vandhiyathevan is no friend of mine—my greatest enemy, in fact,” he snapped finally, goaded beyond endurance at his sister’s perverse sentiments. “A scoundrel who tried to murder me by plunging a knife in my back—wed him, and both of you shall meet death at my hands!” He showed the terrible scar that snaked along his back, and explained that his present return to health was solely to the credit of the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani’s devoted and consummate nursing.

“Should you ever cherish the slightest loyalty to me—reject Vandhiyathevan!” was his final, appalling ultimatum.

Faced with such absolutes, Manimekalai’s sentiments truly did undergo a change—for she did cherish a great deal of love for her brother, in which case, marrying his would-be assassin was unthinkable indeed.

Nobly, she embarked on the task of removing Vandhiyathevan from her heart; a task that proved arduous for try as she might, the memory of his laughing countenance rose unbidden at random, unexpected moments, sometimes in her daydreams—and even in those of her sleep.

All these tumultuous experiences had, of course, somewhat diminished her natural exuberance; it was a drooping young woman who meandered through the palace, lost in sorrow and depression.

The elders naturally jumped to the conclusion that her despair was rooted in preoccupation about marriage; her own companions teased her mercilessly, trying to raise her wilting spirits by playful banter and mischievous games—none of which achieved the purpose.

Still, Manimekalai's despondency seemed to have lifted somewhat in the past few days; her parents and Kandamaaran's resolution to abandon the Marriage-to-Madhuranthakan scheme had obviously contributed to her renewed happiness —but now, judging by various veiled hints and sly speeches, their thoughts seemed to have taken another direction: her marriage to the Chakravarthy's firstborn and the crown prince, Aditha Karikalar.

There was not a soul in Thamizhagam who had not heard of his stupendous martial exploits; or that he was refusing marriage for some reason and had done so, for a while. To wed such a one—a not incomparable stroke of good fortune, wasn't it? A fortune for which God knew how many princesses of who knew what clans were performing a veritable penance … a prospect that could not but flatter Manimekalai.

Her spirits soared even higher as news arrived of prospective visits by Aditha Karikalar from Kanchi and Periya Pazhuvettarayar, from Thanjai; she felt almost her old, lively self as she realized that Ilaiya Rani Nandhini would likely form part of the Pazhuvoor retinue—her beloved brother's saviour, and there was not much she had not learnt from Kandamaaran about that gracious lady's unsurpassed beauty, formidable intellect and manifold charms — not to mention the new matrimonial efforts for which, he was quick to inform her, the Young Queen was responsible. The considerable onus of superb Kadambur hospitality towards his benefactress would therefore devolve solely on Manimekalai, he reiterated.

She was nothing loath, for the intervening weeks had moulded and matured her young heart; the Pazhuvoor Rani's good graces could ripen into a friendship that might offer insights into Thanjai court and culture—*then we'll see how those women disport themselves, won't*

we? Manimekalai mused, complacent. *Won't I give them a taste of their own medicine?*

And so, the last week or so saw the Kadambur princess in a veritable foment of excitement, running here, there, everywhere as she oversaw to a nicety the arrangements for the soon-to-arrive visitors, fairly bubbling with enthusiasm; in particular was she concerned with the chambers allocated to the Ilaiya Rani—hadn't her brother taken such pains to impress upon her the importance of the Queen's visit? She wore the palace employees to the bone, making sure that the rooms were excellently appointed, not to mention driving her own companions up the wall as she persuaded every man and woman in re-arranging knickknacks and other special articles at least thirty times.

The Pazhuvoor Rani was not her only object of preoccupation, of course; she ensured that the rooms allotted to Aditha Karikalar and his friends came under equally rigid supervision—someone named Parthibendran was one of these and God knew his temperament; didn't men change these days in a twinkling after all and who knew the reasons? Why, her brother's dear friend Vandhiyathevan himself had once been a part of Karikalar's entourage and if only he hadn't turned into such a traitor, surely he could've been a visitor too, and …

Yes; Manimekalai's interest in welcoming the royals might be all-consuming—but there was no denying memories of a certain back-stabbing traitor. Not completely.

Having been informed that the Pazhuvoor Queen might arrive that very night, Manimekalai entered Nandhini's chambers for one last inspection, finally coming to a halt in front of a mirror set in the wall. A critical analysis of her reflection convinced her of its merits; her face was not lacking in beauty, she decided and was about to leave —when she stopped short.

There was another face in the mirror. Close to her own—so close that it seemed cheek might nuzzle cheek. At the sight of this countenance—the countenance of the very Vaanar warrior who tormented her dreams—Manimekalai's lips puckered, uttering a soft, surprised "Coo!"

The next instant she was left with her own reflection; the other had vanished.

Hidden Meanings and Explanations

"Should you ever cherish the slightest loyalty to me …"

The word Kalki uses for "slightest" here is "*ellaththanaiyum* …" which literally translates to "the size of a sesame seed."

Chapter 7

The Tailless Monkey

Manimekalai sank into thought, for a while.

The scene she'd witnessed a few moments ago—had it been a figment of her imagination? Or a fragment from her dreams? If the latter, surely she must be asleep now? She pinched herself—no, she was as awake as possible; besides, wasn't this the chamber prepared for the exalted Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani? *There—there's my face, reflected clearly in the marble mirror; the kuthuvilakku nearby*.

She stared at the wall opposite the mirror, well aware of the existence of a secret entrance that could be opened both within and without. On impulse, Manimekalai plastered herself against the door disguised as the wall, listening with all her ears, for it was of wood—and discerned, immediately, some faint noise from the *vettai mandapam* beyond.

Opening the door slowly, she peered into the hunting trophy chamber, to see most of it shrouded in darkness. In one far corner burned bravely a lone, small *akal* lamp—a lamp which dimmed for a moment, before brightening again. As though someone had passed in front of it. Which likely explained the strange phenomenon of the lamp. As for that someone—his face—could it possibly belong to the one she'd seen moments ago, in the mirror? Or was all this too, an elaborate hallucination woven by her demented mind?

"Who's there?" Manimekalai clapped her hands, still peering forward. A harsh clearing of throat was the only answer to her subdued query. A bat suddenly deserted its upside down perch from the ceiling and

swooped to another section, only to resume its drowsy penance. And then, there—again—that low, faint cough.

"*Adiye*," Manimekalai called aloud, not moving an inch from the threshold. "Chandramathi!"

"Yes, *Amma*?" came an answering voice.

"Come here at once—and bring a lamp, will you?"

A handmaiden appeared within awhile, hand-held illumination duly in accompaniment. "Surely these rooms are well-lit, *Amma*?" She hesitated, surveying the area. "Why another lamp, then?"

"To investigate the *vettai mandapam*—I rather thought I heard something."

"What else but a bat flapping its leathery wings?"

"No, my girl. At least, not just that. I was gazing into this mirror right here and what should I see, all of a sudden, but another face, close to my own—!"

"And what a face, to be sure," the maid grinned cheekily. "The handsome features of Manmadhan? Or the fair countenance of Archunan?"

"Laughing at me, are you?"

"Not at all, but I'm curious: would it be the one you've mentioned often as appearing in your dreams?"

"Indeed, Chandramathi—and it seemed so real, too."

"I've heard of such delusions, *Amma*; these peculiar fancies seize young women at some time or other—*sithabramai*, I assure you. Pray bide your time; a day or two and the prince from Kanchi will be

here. One look at his face—and you'll forget the old one in moments!"

"You leave that well alone and come with me into the *vettai mandapam*, do."

"A waste of time. There's bound to be nothing but dust and cobwebs by the bundle—my *seelai* will be ruined."

"So?"

"Would you rather be racked by coughs and sneezes, especially when everyone's arriving tomorrow and—"

"Let them. We're investigating the trophy chamber this very moment, so make sure you don't dangle that lamp all over the place and put it out."

Somewhere in the middle of these admonishments Manimekalai entered the *vettai mandapam*; the maid followed, albeit with some reluctance.

The duo strolled around the chamber for a while, Chandramathi staring above her handheld lamp at the lifeless beasts, while Manimekalai scrutinized not just the walls but the floor as well, her keen eyes picking out footprints here and there, smudging the hitherto undisturbed dirt.

"*Amma*—over there!" panted the maid.

"What—why're you so terrified?"

"The tailless monkey—it seemed to move!"

"Expressing delight at your presence, no doubt."

"You laugh at me, my lady?"

“As you did a moment ago, about my so-called delusions.”

“Could it be the monkey’s face you saw in the mirror? After all, it’s directly across the entrance and—there! It moved again!”

“*Chee*, just your lamp’s shadow. I’m not surprised it seems like the monkey’s come to life. Time to leave, I think; there’s no one here.”

“It *was* the monkey in the mirror, I’m sure. That, or the stuffed owl plunked up there. Oh, the way it glares at us—”

“Spare *me* the honour, my girl; yours are the undeniable charms that force its unblinking stare—”

“But then, the face in the mirror—whose could it have possibly been?”

“*Adiye*, haven’t you racked your considerable wits and already concluded that I must be afflicted by *sithabramai*? Perhaps the reflection showed me a face I see often in my dreams … ah, that I should have been forced to glimpse monkeys and owls through eyes that have feasted on that charming countenance! My hardships are unending—but let’s leave, now. I wonder if I can catch sight of that face in the mirror again?”

The two women stepped back through the secret entryway and again, into the *anthappuram*.

From behind the monkey-sans-tail finally emerged Vandhiyathevan, sneezing heartily twice or thrice, expelling the dust and grit in his nostrils. The next item on his complicated agenda was to tender his thanks to a hunting trophy that had performed its office wonderfully well.

“May you be blessed with longevity, my friend—though I admit to some fury at being compared to you, by that maid—I even

contemplated bursting out from my hiding-place, but thank God for my formidable self-control which helped me retain some sense … but what of my fate had you not stood here, tall, strong and completely stuffed? I'd have been discovered by those giggling girls, wouldn't I? Live long, my loyal, lovely ape!"

Even as he spoke these words, it occurred to him that the worlds wouldn't have collided had he indeed been seen—for he'd guessed, more or less, the identities of said girls.

Not to mention having heard every word of their conversation; not so very difficult, considering Manimekalai's *ganeer*! bell-like tones. But some of her words didn't, he mused, make much sense—for instance, about the face in the mirror and the one in her dreams … wait.

He stopped short as old memories wavered mistily in his mind's eye: Kandamaaran revealing how often he'd mentioned him to his sister—his own short-lived glimpses of Manimekalai during a very brief visit to Kadambur—Kandamaaran's swift about-turn the very next day about entertaining other plans for her marriage—good God! Hadn't this naïve maiden possibly changed her sentiments?

But no; this was hardly the time and place to puzzle over a Kadambur princess's heart; he ought to get out of this place and soon. The elephant's tusk opened a path to the *anthappuram*, which rendered it useless; he'd simply have to stumble about and find the way he came. Aware as he was that unlocking a secret passage from inside and out employed different techniques, the problem that beset him was this: while discovering the means to open one was somewhat within the realm of possibility, how on earth was he to actually *find* the location of said passage? Staring endlessly at the walls—only faintly illuminated, to boot—was no help … until his fertile memory prodded him: hadn't a crocodile been sprawled on the floor where he entered?

Quick to act, Vandhiyathevan duly found the animal, stumbled towards the walls and felt around industriously, only to draw a blank. Apprehension ratcheted up several notches as time wore on—heavens, what an ungodly mess! Trapped within a veritable prison; at this rate, he wouldn't have any escape route save the one through the *anthappuram*—stars above, the perils! Unless, of course, Manimekalai extended a warm hand of sympathy and she well might—but how could he explain his presence here, under such mysterious circumstances? Vandhiyathevan bit his lips. Blurt that he cared for her? *I came for love of you* … and then he shook himself. A terrible, cruel lie, that—one she might not swallow, should he even have the gumption to utter it.

Besides, there was no guarantee that she might be alone; what if he stumbled upon her amidst a bevy of females? *Just an inkling to Sambuvaraiyar and he'll slay me*.

His attention wandered, once again, to the hapless crocodile on the ground, igniting a spark of anger. "Why do you insist on gaping so, you lifeless, useless piece of—" and he delivered a mighty kick, budging the beast just a smidgeon—to see, underneath, a small hole by the wall.

"So *you* were the obstruction, were you? Why couldn't you have said so, dim-witted fool of a …" Vandhiyathevan bent and pulled heartily, upon which the hole grew, by degrees—revealing steps, underneath.

Chapter 8

Two Hands in the Dark!

Vandhiyathevan paused, lost in astonishment at Kadambur's cunningly concealed secret passage entrances: an interloper, ignorant or only dimly aware of their location could easily land in

danger should he attempt a hasty entrance or exit—and if the crocodile shifted, half way down the stairs, he would be stranded, crushed between walls.

Affirming that the reptile was indeed motionless, Vallavarayan approached the *dhvaaram* and was about to set foot below when—ah! *What on earth—were those footsteps in the passage? Who could it be—Azhwarkkadiyaan, in search of me? Far better to head him off then—no, these clamouring steps are not those of one man but a group; five or six at the very least. Idumbankaari, perhaps, and his cohorts?*

Vandhiyathevan sprang forward and dived behind the tailless monkey once again, berating himself for having been so remiss as to leave the entrance to the secret passage open. Ah, would this lead to suspicion about—*but no, it was open even as I entered, and closed only when I set foot on the first step; far better that it's open now—ah, there! A head in the piladhvaaram … and Idumbankaari it is. He's pausing to stare around, one leg on the first stair and the other below—presumably to keep the hole from closing.*

Adede, what's this light here—why, the elephant's face is shifting—revealing the entrance to the anthappuram! Who could be coming through—wait, Manimekalai, surely, a lamp in her hand?

Idumbankaari practically leaps forward; the entrance closes—upon which he begins, with every semblance of professionalism, to tear the turban off his head and dust the tiger nearby! *Good God, what could possibly signal the end of this elaborate charade?*

Manimekalai raised her lamp, peering carefully in all four directions—rearing back with a start at the sight of the servant, who halted his industrious cleaning and stared back, not a jot backward in reflecting her own shocked surprise. "Heavens, *Thaaye*—what brings you here, at this time of day?" His astonishment seemed complete.

"You, Idumba?" She paused, eyeing him. "I could ask you the same."

“The guests arriving tomorrow might wish to visit the trophy lodge, mightn’t they, *Amma*? I’m doing my best to clean the place—Young Master commanded that I do so, before he left for Kanchi.”

“Indeed; his trust reposes in just two people here: you, and me. I was just surveying the Pazhuvoor Rani’s rooms to check if all was in readiness for her highness’s stay, when I heard some noise—and I immediately suspected you, for who else possesses such extensive knowledge of this palace’s secret passages?” Manimekalai drew a deep breath. “How long have you been here, anyway?”

“A little more than a *naazhigai*, *Thaaye*—and there’s another’s worth of work to be done. Are you here alone, *Amma*? What about that gabble-monger, Chandramathi?”

“I bid her bring my father to investigate the strange noises—but it’s just you, isn’t it? I’d better head her off, then.”

Idumbankaari’s expression flickered for a moment and Manimekalai, raising her lamp as she spoke, caught the minute change—as swiftly as she registered, out of the corner of the eye, a faint movement from the tailless monkey just like before.

“A wise decision, *Amma*, especially as Master has a great deal to do today; once you’ve made her inform him that his presence is unnecessary, do retire; rest assured that I shall see to everything.”

Manimekalai returned the way she came; the secret door closed.

Idumbankaari crept towards the elephant’s face and plastered his ear against the wall, turning away only when he was certain that not a sound could be heard from the adjoining room. Having opened the *piladhvaaram*, he descended the stairs to waist level, and waited.

From within the hole came the coarse call of an owl; Idumbankaari answered with one of his own.

The muted clatter of many feet through the underground passage.

Sadasada! He caught sight of a bat flapping its wings as it flew through the room. And then—

Thadaal! The tailless monkey suddenly crashed down upon him and Idumbankaari, startled out of his wits, lost his balance at the crushing onslaught, staggering to his knees, stumbling down two more steps.

Unaware exactly of what had hurtled into him, he shrieked and screamed, waving his arms frenziedly. Common sense asserted itself a moment later as he realized that a stuffed animal had chosen him for a hapless target and, gathering his shattered composure, he stood the lifeless monkey back on its feet—

—only to feel two strong, seemingly human hands definitely full of life plunge through the hole and try to push him further down the stairs.

The world spun; Idumbankaari stood gaping for a moment, too petrified to even think.

He stared up and down again, noticing, then, that his late stuffed assailant had actually been upended headfirst down the hole, the *dhvaaram*'s door having stuck halfway across its body.

That did it; the two supposedly human hands must have been entirely a product of his overwrought imagination.

By now, the secret passage travelers had approached, the foremost among them characteristically Ravidasan. "What on earth was all that screaming and blubbering for, *Appane*?" He demanded, justifiably concerned. "Danger afoot? Ought we to turn back?"

"Good God, no," Idumbankaari assumed a creditable nonchalance. "This stupid stuffed animal suddenly chose this moment to crash

upon my head as I opened the secret door—and I was just startled. But now," he stared at the hapless monkey, annoyed beyond belief. "Now, it bars our path, neither sliding down nor pushing up. Patience, while I find a way to dispose of our unwelcome intruder."

***

Readers would have guessed, undoubtedly, whose were the relentless hands that pushed a stumbling Idumbankaari from above. Vandhiyathevan's luck had held fast even at this juncture, allowing him to use a handy ruse at a most opportune moment; he had thrust the monkey exactly as Idumbankaari stood on the *piladhvaaram*'s steps, staring at a bat, later shoving the servant so he could not identify his assailant, and then further stuffing the monkey headfirst down the hole and finally, shifting the crocodile.

His task completed in a few scant moments, Vandhiyathevan scampered towards the elephant head, twisting the tusks with all his strength.

A breach in the wall—but not along the dimensions of the one facilitating Manimekalai's previous entrance; this was much smaller and rounder—perhaps a door within a door? No time though to ponder the logistics of opening the bigger entrance; the devious group of conspirators would enter the chamber any moment and all hell might break loose.

There was little choice, really, except to escape through the one way that remained.

To think was to act; Vandhiyathevan promptly proceeded to wriggle through the hole as far as his head, shoulders and half his body—after which he could not budge an inch. Not all his efforts to thrust forward yielded results; his hands simply scrabbled in mid-air, desperate to find purchase—at which precise moment the lamp abruptly winked out, plunging the room into darkness.

“Chandramathi!” Vandhiyathevan’s yell held a distinct note of entreaty. “Help me, Chandramathi!”

A voice—feminine—went into merry peals of laughter.

“You’re here then, are you?” Vandhiyathevan carried on. “And standing by, watching me in difficulties? Such a well-bred young woman!”

This sally won more giggles and finally, a verbal response. “And it’s extremely well-bred to sneak into the *anthappuram*, I suppose.”

Manimekalai, Vandhiyathevan realized, but decided to continue the charade. “I came in answer to your summons, didn’t I, Chandramathi? Now help me out, there’s a good girl; there are men pursuing me who mean nothing but trouble.”

“What a wily little wretch the girl is, to be sure. Well, I’ll just have to teach her—and you—a lesson.”

“Ah, is that the Princess Manimekalai indeed? Good God, I crave your royal pardon; forgive my trespasses just this once, *Ammani* and the virtues of a hundred thousand penances shall be yours; this offense shall never be repeated—” Vandhiyathevan gabbled in a pleading tone.

Two slender arms stretched out from the darkness, guiding him gently forward and onto the ground. The hole in the wall promptly disappeared.

“My eternal gratitude is yours, Princess,” he offered.

“You’d do well to wait until you know the fate I’ve in mind for you.”

“I care not, for you’ve been my saviour from the murderous wretches dogging my heels—and frankly, I’d welcome death at *your* dainty hands than at the hands of those demons!”

“*Adeyappa*! Quite the braveheart, aren’t you? And who are these murderous rogues intent on your destruction—but wait, I’d better light my lamp and see your face for myself …”

“Must you, *Ammani*?” Vandhiyathevan ventured. “After all, it’s the same monkey face you witnessed when you were admiring yours in the mirror earlier; Chandramathi’s description was fitting, wasn’t it?”

Darkness shrouded gentle laughter and the melodious clink of bangles.

Manimekalai had closed her lamp, plunging the room into gloom the moment Vandhiyathevan poked his head into the chamber. Now the lid was released; the lamp flared bright, again—and in its light, she gazed upon his face, transfixed.

Sounds of several people thundering into the trophy *mandapam* reached them, at that moment.

Hidden Meanings and Explanations

“My eternal gratitude is yours, Princess …”

The original of Vandhiyathevan’s rather formal comment to Manimekalai is the quaint ***“Anantha Kodi Vanthanam!”*** which literally translates to an endless, seemingly infinite amount of thanks.

Chapter 9

A Barking Dog

Manimekalai stood still, gazing raptly at Vandhiyathevan's face. He continued to smile, wondering what would convince this young woman to release him, his fertile brain weaving furious schemes for escape.

Fate intervened at this point. "*Amma*!" Called out a voice from some distance. "Did you send for me?"

"No; go about your work," Manimekalai instructed—and the pleasant paralysis that had gripped her until then released its hold. She walked briskly to the hole which had been the means of Vandhiyathevan's entrance, and bolted it from the inside. Gesturing him to follow her further into the room, she stopped abruptly, and turned. "The truth now, *Ayya*—did Chandramathi really call you, as you swore?"

"Indeed, *Ammani*."

“Where and when was this charming invitation offered?”

“Just moments ago! I was hiding behind the monkey in the next chamber and the two of you entered, looked around and left—but she returned and issued a polite request: *Oh Monkey*, quoth she, *Could you not come to my room? It would be a great convenience to frighten unwelcome visitors*! I’m surprised her words did not reach you.”

“If I’d heard her speak so,” a slight, teasing smile played upon her lips. “Would I’ve spared her?”

“Surely there’s no reason to visit your anger upon your poor maid, Princess? It isn’t Chandramathi’s fault if my face and the tailless monkey’s are practically indistinguishable,” Vandhiyathevan quipped.

“They’re very far apart, I assure you.”

“As far as the monkey’s face and the owl’s that hung directly above?”

“Yours is neither—not that you don’t display all the antics of one and the stupid gape of the other … it was you, wasn’t it, who stared at me through that mirror?”

“It was, Princess.”

“Why draw back right away and close the entrance?”

“A celestial nymph’s face suddenly appeared beside mine in the mirror; so concerned was I that she might be terrified by my countenance that I released the elephant’s tusk—and the door shut all by itself.”

“And … did you recognize this celestial maiden?”

“Not then—but I cast back my mind, and knew at once.”

“Knew what?”

“That it was no heavenly maiden I saw but one at whose feet a host of such would willingly serve—the illustrious Manimekala Devi; the apple of Sambuvaraiyar’s eye—his precious daughter; not to mention the adored younger sister of my beloved friend Kandamaaran.”

Manimekalai’s brows twitched together in a frown. “Is that so indeed?” Her derisive laughter held a distinct note of anger. “My brother is your beloved friend?”

“Could it be otherwise, Princess? Surely you remember my visit a scant few months ago? I made sure to tender my respects to the royal mothers in the *anthappuram* … you couldn’t have forgotten.”

“I hadn’t; especially such a recent event. And so, you are the famed Vallavarayar Vandhiyathevar, scion of the Vaanar clan?”

“Indeed, your highness; a pitiful soul still sporting the royal title of *Araiyan* with neither palace to reign nor kingdom to rule! There existed a time when your brother could barely keep from talking of you; once, when he and I spent our time on sentry duty upon the banks of the Vada Pennai. And I—well, I too cherished dreams and hopes once of … but I’ve forgotten all, now.”

A strange suspicion suddenly took hold of Manimekalai’s maiden heart. Kandamaaran had certainly informed her that it was Vandhiyathevan who had stabbed and tried to kill him, but what he hadn’t mentioned was a motive. What could that have been? Surely—surely it wasn’t on her account? Could it possibly be …? Spurned by her family, rejected by her brother—could he have fought with Kandamaaran in a fit of blind fury? The thought raised a storm of exhilaration in a heart—a storm she chose to turn into one of wrath.

“Enough of these ancient stories, *Ayya*,” she assumed a stern mien. “Reveal the truth of your furtive entrance into the palace, or I may be forced to summon my maid and raise the alarm.”

“Haven’t I already, *Devi*? Several assassins were pursuing me with the fell intention of murder; I was fleeing from them when I suddenly saw a hole in the ground which I realized at once must lead to some sort of secret passage. I entered—lo and behold!—to find myself here!”

“Ah, none warrants the title of a brave warrior more than you, *Ayya*. I’ve heard tell of great heroes who accomplished marvelous feats—*asakaaya soorar*, so to speak—but never one who excelled in taking to his heels. Utharakumaran pales to insignificance, in fact.”

Vandhiyathevan was conscious of a sharp prick of humiliation. He’d denigrated Manimekalai as a silly, rather vacuous girl and now here she was, lampooning him with razor-like scorn. “There were seven or eight of them, *Devi*,” he managed to explain, after an uncomfortable pause. “And I, just one. They possessed weapons too, while I had none. My prized spear was taken by Kollidam’s deluge—”

“And a fitting fate, don’t you think, for a disgusting, wretched weapon that stabs beloved friends in the back?” Before Vandhiyathevan, startled beyond measure, could manage a reply, she swept on. “The truth, if you please: were you indeed escaping assassins—or are you one yourself?”

“Siva Siva—Narayana!” Vandhiyathevan practically hopped on one foot as though scalded. “To be accused of—why, *Devi*? Why would I intend murder—especially the dear sister of my devoted friend?”

“How would I know? You describe my brother in such honeyed words and yet felt not the slightest hesitation in stabbing him … perhaps the same motivation has now driven you here on another mission, with another target.”

“Good God, such terrible accusations—I, to have stabbed Kandamaaran—I’d rather chop off my own hand before even—Princess, who has been poisoning your mind with appalling lies?”

“My own brother. I wouldn’t have believed it from anyone else.”

“Then I am undone, for this is the truth: some demon stabbed him in the back and flung him by the fort-walls of Thanjai city. I shouldered his unconscious body to the home of my friend, Sendhan Amudhan—for which I’m rewarded with vile abuse, I suppose. And my motive, *Devi*? What reasons had I for trying to dispose of him in such cowardly fashion? Did your brother offer an explanation?”

“Ha, certainly he did. You scorned my looks and called me ugly, didn’t you? And that I was nothing compared to the ravishing beauties of Thanjavur? Kandamaaran naturally delivered a thrashing and you—not daring to fight him face to face—plunged a knife in his back! True or false?”

“False, false—Good God, completely and undoubtedly false—wouldn’t I have cut out my own tongue before insulting you thus? Wasn’t it Kandamaaran in fact who urged me straitly, to cast you from my heart?”

“Why, pray?”

“You were being courted, he said, by illustrious emperors and so in good conscience, I ought to forget you.”

“Which you promptly did, I suppose.”

“Not at once … and not fully, even then—but I did school my unruly heart to consider you my beloved sister and I must beg you now, Princess: either take me to your brother, or bring him here so I may understand his reasons for having concocted this outrageous, appalling lie—or if he really has misunderstood the situation, do what lies in my power to establish my innocence.”

“Or complete Thanjavur’s mission?”

“Do you mean—”

“That having failed to kill him there—”

“I’d come right into his palace to finish him here? Good grief.”

“Why sneak in through a secret passage, then?”

“Hark, *Devi*—the men pursuing me linger in the next room. Can you not hear their voices; the muffled sound of their movements?”

“But why hunt you?”

“They seemed to be *mandhiravaadhis*—perhaps even involved in *narabali*, human sacrifice.”

“Naturally,” Manimekalai chuckled. “You, a scion with every imaginable princely virtue would certainly satisfy all their criteria.”

“It’s of no little surprise to me as well, *Ammani*—that they’d choose me with my monkey-face and owl-gaze … but your words raise a suspicion: could this possibly be Kandamaaran’s arrangement? Pray, pray take me to him so one of two things happen: either he disabuses his mind of this dreadful misunderstanding, or dispatches me with his own hands. Why go to the trouble of employing assassins? Make my presence known to your brother at once, *Ammani*!”

“There’s no point to this haste, *Ayya*; he’s not in town.”

“No? Where else?”

“Kanchi, to escort Aditha Karikalar; they will be here by nightfall tomorrow. Until then, you—”

“—wish me to remain here? Unfair.”

“No, I’m not; the Pazhuvoor Rani will occupy these rooms in a while and then not even a fly can make its way unbeknownst—you know Periya Pazhuvettarayar’s nature, after all. One glimpse of you here and he’ll hack you into pieces. Ah, how that old man worships his lady,” Manimekalai smirked.

Vandhiyathevan retrieved from his memory all that had transpired during the Pazhuvoor lord’s previous visit. “Is that so indeed?” he asked, pretending innocence. “Does he love her so, then?”

“All the world’s aware of it. They were here eight months ago—ah, well do I remember the talk that was occasioned because he wouldn’t let her set foot into the women’s wing! Such was his extraordinary care … but their present stay is for a few days and the palace has been turned upside down, preparing an entire *anthappuram* for her edification! I wonder if she’ll condescend to see us—will the *kizhavar* deign to let us set eyes on her at least this time?”

“But—what do I do now?”

“I’ve been wondering about that too—stay, I have it! My brother’s private armoury is housed in this mansion and you’ll remain there until he comes home by evening tomorrow. You may make your case then; the truth or otherwise of your arguments shall be established —“

“I’m afraid that’s dishonourable; dangerous too—“

“How so?”

“How could I possibly explain my presence to Kandamaaran?”

“By describing everything exactly as it happened, of course.”

“An account, beg pardon, even you wouldn’t believe just now. Not even with my pursuers lurking in the very next room—”

“—which I may as well investigate right away.”

“Investigate what?”

“The men concealed in the next room. And confirm if they’re indeed your killers or your cohorts—”

“*Ayyo*, they’re demons, *Devi*, and to be in their clutches all alone—”

“—is no cause for concern, *Ayya*; who’d dare harm me in my own palace? As for my safety …” Manimekalai pulled out, dramatically, a small clasp-knife sheathed at her waist. “See? No one can touch me but should they attempt it—you’ll be right here, won’t you, warrior of warriors?”

“I am unarmed at this moment, *Ammani*.”

“*Vallavanukku pullum ayudham*,” Manimekalai quoted soulfully. “A true warrior may find a weapon even in a blade of grass—and you’re named Vallavarayar, aren’t you? Even women may fight when armed; why must men …? But I reiterate: there’s no need for concern; the man in the next room is merely one of our servants engaged in dusting; the others were probably brought in by him. I believe I might know them as well—still, I shall ask their business here. Pray don’t stand so close to the door; conceal yourself by the wooden granary over there.”

Manimekalai approached the entrance to the hunting trophy lodge as she spoke, attempting to open it, while Vandhiyathevan hurried to said granary. Its doors were open and he peered inside, making the discovery that it was not meant to store grains at all, instead containing a series of steps on which were arranged musical instruments: *yaazh*, *veenai*, *mathalam*, *thaalam*, and various others.

He craned his neck and saw that the stairs went further, right to the roof.

By now, Manimekalai had opened the door and entered the adjoining chamber. Vandhiyathevan, marveling at her considerable courage, managed to convince himself that she stood in no danger—when a door on another side of the room swung out, revealing Chandramathi.

"*Amma*?" She called.

Startled, Vandhiyathevan snuck into the musical instruments repository, hoping that she would not see him.

"Our guests from Thanjavur seem to have arrived at the fortress gates, *Amma*," Chandramathi announced in a loud voice. "Maharani desires your presence at once!" She stared around, and then made her way to the hunting trophy chamber which stood open.

Aware that he would be visible within the storeroom to anyone by the door, Vandhiyathevan swiftly ran up a few steps. In his haste, his knee banged against a *veenai*; flustered, he clambered further until he came to a sudden stop—for his head was butting against the top of the storeroom, but wonder of wonders! The plank that made the roof actually rose a little under his thrusting head.

A sudden suspicion taking root, he raised his hands and hefted the "roof"—to see it lift completely, allowing light to filter in. *Salasala* … flowed a faint sound from the distance while on one side, stars twinkled merrily in the sky.

Vandhiyathevan's heart leapt with sheer delight.

Setting aside the plank he climbed out fully, and realized that he stood upon a section of the palace's upper terraces—in fact, the sleeping quarters he'd occupied on his previous visit; the very same

area from where he'd spied upon the devious conspiracies of Chozha chieftains, hidden behind heaving pillars.

Vandhiyathevan replaced the plank carefully, recognizing that it was well nigh impossible to even suspect an entrance from the terrace—not that he had the luxury of marveling at such a cunningly wrought concealed passage or mulling about its technical aspects; it was time he considered his escape route. Surely the Goddess of Good Fortune who'd stood by his side all this while could hardly fail him now?

Vandhiyathevan stared around him. All around fluttered flags and buntings in every direction, transforming the palace complex into a colourful, enthusiastic wonderland. *Adada*, this was no doubt the true meaning of *rajobachaaram*; a right royal welcome.

Slowly, slowly did he creep forward, taking step by cautious step, gazing here, there, everywhere. No trace of human presence upon the terrace; a stroke of luck, that.

Soon he was upon the moonlit terrace he'd slept in, before—from where the palace's outer fort-walls; the spacious courtyard between *madhil* and mansion; the stage hosting the *Kuravai Koothu* and the site of the secret conspiracy were all spread out below, clearly visible. Not that there were people here either, the reasons for which were not difficult to divine.

The palace's entrance was in complete uproar; hundreds of torches burnt bright while the thunderous rhythm of beating drums, blowing trumpets, and *perigai* instruments clamoured to compete with the earsplitting chants of the public, creating unbelievable pandemonium. Pazhuvettarayar's entourage having approached the gates, the entire palace had naturally turned out in welcome. Ah, the Goddess of Fortune was truly on Vandhiyathevan's side, for this was a perfect window of opportunity; half a *naazhigai* before or after, and such brazen escape would have been impossible.

Approaching the site of the conspiracy, Vandhiyathevan stared around once more and peered below; not a soul. He gazed at the fort wall opposite—again, not a … wait, what was that! Ah—a face between tree branches, looking remarkably like Azhwarkkadiyaan — *chee*, his brain was playing tricks on him; of course, that was where he'd seen the Vaishnavite's round countenance once before—an apt delusion, however, for if there ever was a perfect spot to vault over these high walls, this was it; his mind had simply chosen this ruse to remind him of that fact. He ought to make his escape before the raucous welcome party at the entrance trooped back, but how was he to descend to the courtyard—ah, here was a path! A shack had been erected, presumably for the *Kuravai Koothu*, with a stout bamboo pole in the ground, conveniently long enough to reach the upper terraces. Leaping swiftly towards it, Vandhiyathevan grabbed sure hold and slithered down. He scrutinized the area again; the place was devoid of life. Stay—on the terrace above, where he'd been just moments ago, could be heard a faint, tinkling sound. Manimekalai presumably, in search of him. Little imp! He couldn't afford being caught in her toils just at this moment.

Vandhiyathevan crossed the open courtyard in a flash; paused under the tall *madhil* and turned to peer at the terrace—where could be faintly glimpsed a feminine form; Manimekalai or Chandramathi. Whoever it was had in all likelihood seen his desperate dash, but had the remarkable good sense to refrain from raising the alarm. *Long live this thoughtful maiden, and may fortune smile on her*!

Having duly delivered a benediction, he walked swiftly along the wall, soon reaching the spot where he'd seen Azhwarkkadiyaan's face before—and now a fresh problem assailed him: how was he to scale it? For the *madhil* was quite high, with nothing; no protrusions or clefts for foot or handholds—good God, what was he to—wait, here was a solution: some of the bamboo poles clearly meant for the *Kuravai Koothu* shack were still lying in a heap—presumably leftovers. He practically bounded forward, grabbed one and leant it against the wall, gauging it—yes, they were of a height. But would it

stand in place? What if it began to slip even as he was climbing—well, he'd crash to the ground of course, but surely he couldn't just stand about for hours wondering if his ruse would or wouldn't pan out?

Vandhiyathevan tapped the pole twice to test its strength, placed his trust in the Almighty and began to climb. As expected, it began to slide as he was halfway up. *I'm done for*, he mused, heart in mouth. *The fall will fracture all my bones*!

Miraculously though, the pole kindly delayed its descent—and to Vandhiyathevan's fanciful eyes, it seemed as though a hand had gripped it hard. *Well, it's certain then; I'm completely, utterly insane*, he muttered to himself as he pulled himself up. The moment he grabbed hold of the *madhil*'s lip, the pole finally lost its tenuous traction and crashed to the ground, the deafening noise assaulting his ears like thunder. Thankfully, however, the clamour at the palace entrance had now reached fever-pitch; the chances of anyone hearing a falling pole were infinitesimal. But what about the girl on the terrace? She couldn't have helped hearing it.

Leaping upon the *madhil*, Vandhiyathevan turned once more to gaze in the direction of the palace—to discover that the woman remained exactly where she was.

Characteristically, his irrepressible spirits rose; he waved a saucy *Farewell*! and began his descent on the other side. This proved a much easier prospect for the outside of the wall, not quite so smooth as its inner counterpart, provided plenty of clefts and crests not to mention trees nearby, whose branches helped him slither down quickly.

Laughter bubbled up from him at the ridiculous ease with which he'd outwitted Manimekalai …

… laughter that echoed from somewhere else.

The blood froze in Vandhiyathevan's veins. Hands suddenly shaking, he peered down to gauge his jump—and realized that a dog stood directly underneath, ready to spring on him.

There was no way he could climb back up; his only way was down—in which case, the snarling beast would certainly claim its pound of flesh. Was it laughter he'd heard moments ago—or the dog's bark? Was this a calculated plot? Had someone sent the dog and was even now concealed nearby? What constituted the greater danger: going up? Or jumping down?

Vandhiyathevan's spirits swung wildly—while his legs, in a vain bid to escape the salivating jaws of the snarling dog leaping and bounding below—swung desperately.

Hidden Meanings and Explanations

Utharakumaran

The unlegendary prince of the Matsya kingdom and the son of King Virada, he played host, unwittingly, to the Pandavas during their year of anonymous exile. Poor Utharakumaran's capabilities, pitted against renowned warriors such as the sons of Pandu and their adversaries, the Kauravas, didn't show him in a good light; during his first ever encounter with the latter on the battlefield, he distinguished himself by running away, only to be dragged back willy-nilly by Archunan, disguised as his sister Uthara's dance teacher/eunuch, Brihannalai. Although Utharakumaran did manage to redeem himself and regain some of his lost dignity over the years, first impression stuck and he became a byword for debilitating cowardice.

Chapter 10

Manhunt

Even as Vandhiyathevan's brain raced, calculating the odds of a slither to the ground and thereby risking the dog's jaws—or a

scramble back up the *madhil* and thereby risking the guards' jaws, his eyes feverishly scanned the luxurious growth of trees nearby for human presence. Ah, was that a flash of white cloth in the wild thicket? His mind recalled the canine's furious barks mingling with faint chuckles—could there, in fact, be a man concealed by the trees? One, or many? Jumping down without ascertaining this would be a massive mistake—snared by the gaping maw of a slavering dog was one thing; but the grasping hands of the enemy would be something else altogether. Looking out from the palace's upper balconies, it'd seemed as though Azhwarkkadiyaan's face had appeared atop the *madhil*—perhaps the Vaishnavite had grown tired of endlessly waiting at the Ayyanaar temple and set this animal upon him as some sort of ill-timed joke? Getting a little of his own back, perhaps?

"Oy Nambi, what sort of sport is this?" he called out. "Vaishnavite!"

There—there was that derisive chuckle again, and it wasn't Azhwarkkadiyaan's voice. In which case, as well just return the way he came and re-enter the palace he'd been in such a hurry to leave—he could muster a ruse to blend into the tumult and uproar of the imminent Pazhuvettarayar arrival. If all else failed, there was always the secret passage. It shouldn't be too difficult to fall at Manimekalai's pretty feet and cozen her again—or, as a last resort, beg the Ilaiya Rani's favour: after all, if she hadn't betrayed him in all this time, it wasn't likely that she would now, was it?

Having come to a decision, Vandhiyathevan began to scramble up the wall again, even as the dog jumped higher, barking and snarling increasing exponentially.

The mocking laughter echoed once more.

A shadowy figure slunk out from behind the tree-line, spear in hand and resolved, before Vandhiyathevan's rather resigned eyes, into the Devaralan—who now approached the man dangling precariously off the wall. "You've a mighty fine grasp on life, *Appane*," he quipped.

“Finally privy to the facts, aren’t you?” Vandhiyathevan scoffed. “Why approach me, then?”

“Because—you can’t escape me now,” the Devaralan hefted the spear, and aimed it straight at him.

Never had the evils of his situation been more apparent to Vandhiyathevan, for there was no way he could battle a man about to launch a weapon at him, hanging halfway along the wall. Not to mention the snarling dog waiting for him if he risked a jump to the ground. Either way, he was done for.

“Careful now, Devarala,” he rasped, rallying his strength. “Remember the orders of the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani—hasn’t your mistress expressly warned you all to never lay a finger on me?”

“Mistress, my foot,” the Devaralan let loose a truly ghoulish cackle. “The Pazhuvoor Queen is no mistress of mine; no earthly queen could ever be—for, the gloriously powerful Badrakali, Durga Parameswari is the only one who commands my allegiance!”

“She commands mine too—the Goddess is the patron deity of my clan,” Vandhiyathevan rattled off without hesitation. “How else do you think I managed to escape unscathed from a burning ship mid-sea? Touch me—and She will make mincemeat of you!”

“If that indeed is the truth, promise you’ll carry out my task,” the Devaralan bargained. “I might spare you, then.”

“Yes? What is it? But call off your damned hound first!”

“A Veera Vaishnavite was wandering hereabouts earlier; help me snag him, and I’ll let you live.”

“What on earth do you want *him* for?” Vandhiyathevan hazarded.

“I’ve pledged a Vaishnavite soul to my magnificent Goddess of course; why else?”

This lengthy dialogue proving too much for the slender shrub by which the Vaanar warrior hung, it began to tear off the wall by its roots. “The one you seek is a very dear friend; I shan’t betray him,” he declared even as his wits worked furiously, assessing the possibility of a leap that would somehow land him exactly on the Devaralan’s neck while simultaneously bypassing his spear. “You may as well sacrifice me in his place.”

“You may as well take this spear through your heart, in that case—!” And the Devaralan hefted his weapon, ready to launch it upon his swaying adversary—

—at which precise moment Vandhiyathevan released the shrub, grabbing the base of the spear-point as he abruptly landed, the force tumbling him flat on his back. The Devaralan, flustered for a moment, took only a moment to reclaim his equilibrium, but was still too late: too late to sense the sudden arrival of a figure behind him—too late to see the staff in its hand—and certainly too late to thwart the crushing blow upon his skull.

He crumpled to the ground, on top of Vandhiyathevan.

His faithful dog sought to avenge this supreme insult to his master by pouncing upon his attacker, but Azhwarkkadiyaan was more than ready: he flung his upper garment around the snapping canine’s head, rendering it temporarily blind. The wily Vaishnavite then seized the chance to well and truly truss it up by throwing a handy noose, made of wiry jungle vines around its neck, binding the animal to a nearby tree.

Vandhiyathevan jumped up, having flung off his erstwhile foe, who lay as though one dead from just the one blow. The two scrounged around for more creepers from the dense foliage and tied him up. Then, spear in warrior’s hand and staff in Vaishnavite’s, they set off.

Finding a path through and exiting the stifling jungle that bounded, in wide swathes, the sides of Sambuvaraiyar's fort excepting the entrance section was a herculean task and well outside the realm of any but an expert; the duo was careful to hug the fort-walls.

"What a mistake to have trusted in your wits," Azhwarkkadiyaan opened the gambit even as they walked, almost jogged along the path. "I assumed you possessed some."

"You're referring to my half-baked entry into the secret passage, I suppose—but if you only knew the horrifying mysteries I unearthed in the process," Vandhiyathevan snapped.

"Be that as it may, why on earth didn't you just say *Yes* and be done with it, when he told you to help him find a pesky Vaishnavite?" Azhwarkkadiyaan demanded. "Why would you subject yourself willingly to danger?"

"The fatal consequence of friendship," Vandhiyathevan quipped.

"Whose, pray? Surely you don't mean mine, for I don't recall a single instance of having driven you to such a barrage of missteps?"

"Not at all; I meant Ponniyin Selvar. Having seen him and befriended him, I—well, I couldn't find it in myself to lie."

"Not even to save yourself? You've turned into a *sathyasandhan*, have you? A paragon of truth?"

"Well, not quite. I also guessed that you were hidden somewhere nearby; what if I'd said I'd fall in with the Devaralan's plans—and you believed me? Nothing would've persuaded you to come to my rescue, would it?"

"Well done. Your wits haven't all deserted you, I'm pleased to see. In truth, I couldn't quite contain my eagerness to know your answer to

his proposition."

"Hah! My instinct to treat you as a creature of extreme suspicion wasn't far off, after all. Besides, I've made it a point never to betray my friends even in passing. But stay—how on earth are you *here*, having promised faithfully to wait in the Ayyanaar Koil?" Vandhiyathevan demanded. "What if I'd returned through the secret passage and found you gone? A pretty pickle—"

"—you'd have been in, for you certainly wouldn't be alive if you'd chosen that route; some of our conspirators entered the secret passage a little after you'd vanished through it. I, however, retained enough faith in your wits to guess that you'd likely emerge somewhere else—such as over this wall."

"Was that why you were here?"

"That wasn't all. Before they went, the plotters left the Devaralan on guard at the passage entrance—presumably so they wouldn't have any unpleasant surprises when they returned; outsiders in the vicinity would ruin their plans. Apparently they'd also arranged upon some sort of signal—not that I knew of this; I assumed that they'd *all* taken the passage. My thoughts were consumed with thoughts of you, all alone and perhaps mired in complications. Naturally, that made me eager to discover the means of opening the passage from outside and I approached the *bali peedam*, trying to twist it.

"That was when I heard the footsteps. I turned, startled, to find the Devaralan almost upon me, spear in hand.

"It's no news that the conspirators had decided, ages ago, to kill me upon sight. With no weapon in my hands, I had no choice but to take to my heels. The Devaralan followed, of course, but the dense jungle made it impossible for him to dog my tracks. After a while, it seemed that he'd given up.

“Believing myself to be finally free of him, I resolved to make my way to the *rajapattai*. In the distance, I could see the shadowy form of a shack; within, fitfully glowed a small lamp. I approached, hoping to ask directions to the king’s road—but some instinct for caution made me slow down and evaluate my surroundings. A wise move, as it turned out—for who should I see at the shack’s entrance, but the Devaralan? A woman and a dog stood by his side; he spoke a few words to her and departed again, this time with the dog in tow. That canine began to bark in my direction—and I realized that I was in more danger than ever. The *rajapattai* ruse had to be given up; I plunged through the forest again. The dog’s intermittent barks meant that I could gauge the location of my tracker. Just as swift as my legs were my wits; I’d already concluded that wandering through the jungle all night would be impossible—they’d run into me at some point. Not an easy task to confront a spear-bearing Devaralan and teeth-baring dog simultaneously, you understand.

“That was when I practically walked into the palace’s *madhil*; if I could just climb over it, I’d be safe, I theorized. And I actually did get to the top—only to see you, at that precise moment, running along the upper balconies. It dawned on me at once that you too, were aiming for the *madhil*, and so I jumped back down with new-found confidence: you and I together, I felt sure, would be able to handle both my human and canine foes. Sharp barks informed me that they were quite close by, and I shinned up a tree. To be fair, they did approach me first—but by then, the sight of you scrambling over the fort-wall caught the Devaralan’s eye, I suppose. He called off the dog and crept up to you … the rest, you know.”

“Vaishnavite …” Vandhiyathevan’s voice trailed away. “What’s your opinion about the power of destiny?”

“What an unusual question. Why this sudden and absorbing interest in destiny?”

“Do you believe that Brahmmadevan, the Creator, decides the life and fortunes of every man at his very birth?”

“I harbour no faith in fate—for if all things are written, there would be no purpose to receiving the grace of God. *Bhakthi* towards the divine Paranthaman would lose all meaning, wouldn’t it? As to what the Azhwars have said on the subject—”

“Spare me their longwinded speeches, for I’ve developed a sudden and strong belief in destiny; I’m convinced now that everything’s predetermined … how else could I have made my escape today, pray?”

“I’m not sure fate, or *vidhi* played any role; rather it was your perspicacity, your *madhi* that came to your rescue.”

“Not at all. My so-called perspicacity almost drowned me in a peril out of my depth; my fate, rather, that towed me out.”

Sometime towards the end of this conversation, they had emerged from the forest; ahead could be glimpsed the Kadambur fort entrance in all its resplendent, tumultuous glory.

The area was fairly thronging with crowds as Pazhuvettarayar’s extensive entourage—consisting of elephants, horses and a host of men—approached with every moment. Sambuvaraiyar awaited his esteemed guest, his retinue in readiness at the impressively decorated gates. An hundred burning torches transformed night into day; the thunderous beats of *perigais*, *murasus*, horns, *thaarais* and *thappattais* blended as they crashed through the air.

“We’d better leave,” Azhwarkkadiyaan grabbed Vandhiyathevan’s hand. “Someone might catch sight of us.”

“No one will—and even if they do, my destiny will bail us out. Besides, ought we to miss the magnificent sight of Pazhuvettarayar descending from his splendid war elephant?”

“Which is all that interests you, I suppose.”

“Fair enough—I’d really like to see if the Pazhuvoor Rani Nandhini disembarks with him as well, or if she’s chosen other means of travel.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure of destiny’s intervention in your favour forever, *Thambi*; for all you know, it could just as easily upend you in the form of a beauteous witch, a *mayamohini*.”
“I’m not much given to such stumbles, Vaishnavite,” Vandhiyathevan grinned. “Honey-traps are meant for others.”

The majestic elephant made a regal halt in front of the palace; Periya Pazhuvettarayar descended from its back, followed by his young queen, prompting Azhwarkkadiyaan into comment. “She’s not favoured a closed palanquin this time, has she? He’s brought her in full view of the public.”

“That’s all I wished to know. Shall we?” And Vandhiyathevan took a step back—but it was now the Vaishnavite, it seemed, who seemed unwilling to leave as he stood rooted in place, eyes trained unblinkingly on the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani.

Perhaps it was the power of his focused stare, or sheer happenstance—but Nandhini turned in his direction.

Her indifferent gaze fell upon Azhwarkkadiyaan’s pinched face, peering through the dark tree-line in the distance—and sharpened. The shadow of panic flitted across her features.
Periya Pazhuvettarayar, always observant when it came to his young wife, noticed her change of expression in a moment and stared, in turn, in the direction she faced.

Two figures skulked in the gloom of the dense, inky-black tree-line in the distance; he turned and whispered a few words into the ears of Sambuvaraiyar, who promptly summoned a couple of his men and snapped a curt order.

To the glorious accompaniment of deafening instrumental music and rousing chants, Periya Pazhuvettarayar and his Young Queen made a grand entrance into the palace.

Almost simultaneously, two cavalrymen galloped into the jungle enveloping the fort—not without some difficulty, for there was no path to speak off and the foliage well-nigh impenetrable. A good distance passed, but there seemed no encroacher and the two sentries had almost traversed the forest and emerged onto open plain on the other side.

“There’s not a soul here, *Annae*—just one of the old man’s ridiculous starts,” commented one.

A dog bounded in their direction, howling at the top of its lungs.

“Ever know when a dog does that, *Thambi*?” The other asked thoughtfully.

“When there’s been a death,” offered the first.

“Also when there are ghosts, ghouls and apparitions flitting about!”

“Taken a good look at you, I suppose.”

“Not at all *Thambi*—it’s just pegged *you* for one!”
A loud, ghoulish cackle rang out from somewhere above, and the banter ceased as the two men craned their heads fearfully— to see two horrifying apparitions perched upon the branches, leering down at them.

The next instant, they had pounced upon the soldiers, dealt resounding slaps, dragged them by the scruff of their necks and pushed them down!

And then—then, the wicked ghouls sprang upon the stallions, thundering across the forest and onto the wide open plains beyond.

Hidden Meanings and Explanations

When Azhwarkkadiyaan cautions Vandhiyathevan that destiny might not always come to his aid, the precise phrase he uses is "*kudai kavizhthaalum kavizhthuvidum*." The literal translation is that "your umbrella might well be upended"—which sounds weird when put that way, but actually has a deeper meaning, rooted in cultural (and royal) milieu: it refers to the ornate state umbrella usually held above a ruler—the fabled *Venkotra Kudai*, the very representation of monarchy. Its fall usually symbolized catastrophe to kingship. Gradually, this came to represent disaster in general, as well.

True Friend? Or Traitor?

Aditha Karikalan and his companions, entourage in tow, galloped past the entrancing natural landscape of the Manimutha and Vellaaru rivers' confluence. Conversation revolved, mostly, around the welcome and hospitality offered to the crown prince the previous night in Thirumudhukundram and, as an addendum, the sacred renovation of the *kshethram*.

"What pleases me about this holy shrine is Sundara Murthy Naayanar's actions," Parthibendran commented casually.

"Anything in particular?" demanded his royal companion.

"Certainly. His refusal to sing the praises of an old woman, of course."

"Did he really … why, I know nothing of this story," Karikalan marvelled. "Go on!"

On one of his regular pilgrimages, the celebrated Saivite had arrived in Thirumudhukundram also known as Vriddhachalam and as was his wont, made his way straight to the temple where, once the priests had offered an appropriate welcome, performed the required rituals and conducted worship, a petition was duly made: could Sundara Murthy Naayanar enshrine their lord in verse?

"I shall think upon it," was the venerated man's nonchalant answer. "In any case—the deity's name?"

Said deity delighted in *Vriddhagireeswarar* after the town, informed the bhattars, their faces bright and smug at the pronunciation—

—only to fall as the Naayanar's countenance grew pinched with dissatisfaction. Was he to exercise his considerable talents in singing

the praises of a senile *kizhavar*? He would give the priests one more opportunity to redeem themselves, he decided, and put forth another query: What was the lord's divine consort, the Amman named?"

"Vriddhagireeswari," replied the bhattars promptly.

"It was not enough that you turned God into a doddering old man; you had to subject the Goddess to the same fate," Sundara fumed. "And I certainly have no intention of singing paeans on a *kizhavan* and *kizhavi*!" He stalked out of the temple in a towering, righteous rage, every inch the injured poet.

Terrified that a temple not honoured by Sundarar's verses would be ostracized from the pantheon of sacred sites, the bhattars huddled together and immediately installed, with considerable pomp and celebration, another idol of the Amman—this time, appropriately titled Balambigai, which signified youth. The error now being rectified, the priestly congregation approached the irate Sundarar with a report of the changed circumstances, petitioning him once more to honour the temple with hymns—upon which the Naayanar relented enough to return to Thirumudhukundram and graciously sang a *pathigam* upon Vriddhagireeswarar and his young consort.

Aditha Karikalan collapsed into laughter that practically shook his body. "Do you think Pazhuvettarayar married Nandhini for a similar reason?" He guffawed. "Perhaps some poet came to his court but refused to sing about an old man and his equally flailing old wife?"

Parthibendran and Kandamaaran laughed so much at this witticism that they seemed almost in danger of falling off their horses. "Why God, in all His wisdom, ever instituted the natural law of old age I'll never know," the Pallava prince said, once he had regained some control over his mirth. "Why couldn't everyone just stay exactly the same until the moment of death, pray?"

"Oh, what do God's dictates matter? Surely growing old or otherwise is in our own hands?"

“But how could that be?” Kandamaaran demanded.

“Think, now: do we ever consider Abhimanyu or Aravaan old?”

The others preserved their silence.

“The *Chithira Mandapam*, the Hall of Art at the Thanjavur royal palace contains portraits of all my ancestors, you know,” Aditha Karikalan carried on, conversationally. “Vijayalaya Chozhar, Aditha Chozhar and Paranthaka Chakravarthy look advanced in years—but what of my father’s elder brother Rajadithyar? Ah, time hasn’t touched him; he appears the very epitome of virile strength, of vitality, vigor and youth! Well, he did not live long, and so gained the blessing of *youvanam*; of being forever young. I wonder which of us is about to be offered that unique gift?”

The continued silence of his companions made it obvious that this conversation was not quite to their taste.

“You’re very quiet, both of you,” Karikalan commented. “Don’t quite relish the subject, eh? But why fear death, pray? We lose this body and receive a brand-new one, in return. There’s really no need to quake at the very idea of death—now, my friend Vandhiyathevan would agree heartily, were he here. Really, no one’s his equal when it comes to grasping every ounce of enjoyment from life; a live-wire, the very spirit of joy! Drag him to the very gates of Yamalokham and he’d still laugh merrily …”

Even as the prince’s enthusiastic encomium trailed away, a veritable storm of dust rose in the distance, soon parting to reveal two horses approaching at breakneck speed. The stallions were almost upon them in the blink of an eye—so swift their gallop that it almost seemed, for a moment, that they would pass by the royal cavalcade.

Aghast and outraged at the very idea of horsemen who would dare ignore their exalted presence, Kandamaaran and Parthibendran

stretched out their spears, preparing to bar the road—a precaution unnecessary, as the newcomers reined their steeds hard, at a little distance.

Vandhiyathevan and Azhwarkkadiyaan jumped down with alacrity—and Aditha Karikalan's joy knew no bounds at the unexpected appearance of his long-lost friend. He leapt down from his stallion instantly, advancing quickly to engulf the Vaanar warrior in a crushing embrace.

"A hundred years to you, *Thambi*—and at a good time as well, for it's hardly been a moment since I mentioned your name!" He exulted.

The sheer, unadulterated resentment his companions felt at this compliment swept over their faces; Kandamaaran and Parthibendran could barely restrain themselves from revealing their loathing. They nudged their horses forward instead, trotting a little ahead of the retinue, and spied more riders approaching.

The men were soon upon them and Kandamaaran, identifying them as Kadambur men, went forward to gather information.

When he returned to the crown prince, it was with a dire expression. "Vandhiyathevan is your friend; certainly, he used to be mine as well—until this bastard plunged a dagger in my back! I'm sorry to accuse him of this dastardly crime, but he betrayed me in the worst way possible. It's therefore my bounden duty, your highness, to warn you: exercise the utmost caution in his regard," he finished soulfully.

Hidden Meanings and Explanations

Vriddhachalam; Vriddhagireeswarar and Vridhagireewari

The name of this town (still famous for its shrine) is derived from Vridha—Old, and Achalam, a mountain. Clearly, the principal deities

were also named “Old lord,” and “Old Goddess,” based on the town’s name—a fact that Sundarar clearly resented.

Abhimanyu; Aravaan

Legendary characters of the Mahabharatham. Abhimanyu was the son of Archunan and almost as celebrated a warrior as his father, eventually trapped within a complicated battle formation during Kurukshethram War, and killed by his enemies. Aravaan, meanwhile, was another of Archunan’s sons, and sacrificed himself on the eve of the war to ensure victory for his side, the Pandavas. Both are tragic figures; venerated as great men who died young, before they could fulfill their potential.

Chapter 12

The Broken Spear

Kandamaaran's heated accusation against his erstwhile beloved friend sent Aditha Karikalan into paroxysms of laughter that practically shook his body. "Plunged his dagger into your back, did he?" he gasped, still chortling. "But why would you just stand around, baring your back to him?" And he relapsed into peals of uncontrollable laughter.

The Kadambur prince's dark face crimsoned; his bloodshot eyes mimicked ruby-red *kovai* fruits; pale lips trembled with barely concealed emotion. "Do you—do you truly consider this a matter of amusement, *Ayya*?" He demanded.

"You're not chiding me for laughing, are you? Laughter is God's greatest boon to humans, Kandamaaraa," Karikalan grinned. "Cows cannot laugh; neither can goats, horses, lions—not even monkeys which possess such a penchant for mad, mischievous tricks; only those who've taken human form can … and here you are, glaring at me for having taken advantage of such a gift! Then too, it's been such a long while since I laughed that the very sound of it rather took me aback. Not that that's made you happy, has it?"

"On the contrary *Ayya*, your happiness pleases me beyond all bounds—but kindly refrain from delighting in my turning my back like a coward before this warrior among warriors," Kandamaaran spat. "The *sooradhi sooran* standing before you stuck his knife into me when I had no absolutely no expectation of it, and the fact that I'm here, whole and healthy, is only due to the magnanimous grace of Devi Durga and the mothering instincts of Devi Nandhini, who nursed me with such devotion. Either investigate into his dastardly act and punish him for his treachery—or allow me to take matters into my own hands!"

"If an investigation is what you desire, there shall undoubtedly be one. Never let it be said that such a plea was ignored by a descendent of the Sembian monarchs; after all, didn't King Sibi, the first of our line, slice off his own flesh to award justice to a dove? And let's not forget Manu Needhi Chozhan, who sacrificed his own son

for the sake of a cow. You're no less than either bird or animal, certainly, and I shan't disregard your request—but cultivate patience until I do the needful. Now, it would be in your best interests, Vallavaraya, if you provide a rebuttal to his accusations before you elaborate on your journey and everything else: did you indeed stab him? And if you did, why descend to such a cowardly, shameful act, pray?"

"I did not stab this giant among heroes, your highness—not in the back, and certainly not cowering behind him in a dishonourable way," Vandhiyathevan snapped smartly. "What I did do was to haul him, stabbed grievously in the back and crumpled in a pool of blood, onto my back, lug him all the way to Sendhan Amudhan's home for treatment—something I regret wholeheartedly, now. In fact, I sincerely wish I'd plunged a dagger into his chest—for I forsook loyalty to my king in favour of love for a comrade. Hark, Sire," he stepped forward. "He accuses me of betrayal—but he, if anything is the real traitor; a traitor not just to friendship, but fealty as well. These elaborately descriptive allegations of a dastardly act—ask him the exact circumstances of his stabbing; ask him where and when he was subjected to this horrible crime. He'd just returned from performing escort-duty through Thanjavur fort's secret passage into Pazhuvettarayar's palace; who was this much-vaunted personage? Ask him the identity of the person he hobnobbed with that night, in the vault. Ask him what happened in his prestigious Kadambur palace on the eighteenth day of auspicious Aadi—ask him who was brought into their home, concealed within a closed palanquin, Sire—ask him!"

"*Adei*, you cur—you petty, pathetic weasel—you—stop, this instant!" Kandamaaran spluttered, tongue literally twisting upon itself, body shaking as though with the ague. "Halt—cease this nonsense—or you'll fall prey to my spear right now!"

Aditha Karikalan reared a little, rather taken aback at this show of shaken outrage, before neatly snatching the weapon from the Kadambur prince's hand and bending the shaft with hands tough as

iron. *Padaar*! The spear broke with an impressive snap. “Careful, now,” warned the Chozha scion, flinging away the two pieces in a swift, practiced move. “I cannot and will not allow my friends to come to blows in my very presence … Parthibendra, make sure you imprison them the instant either of these two ever raise a spear or sword!”

Vandhiyathevan handed over his sword to the Pallava prince at once, who received it with rather poor grace.

“Well, he’s confronted your accusations,” Aditha Karikalan said, finally. “Rest assured I shall investigate the truth or otherwise of his explanation, and deliver a verdict. Now—what about you? Will answers to his questions be forthcoming?”

“I—well—that is, *Ayya*,” Kandamaaran gulped, clearly caught off guard. “I—I’ve sworn never to discuss these matters with anyone—” he stammered unwillingly.

“It appears to me, your highness,” Parthibendran interjected, at this moment. “That the bone of contention between these two concerns a female; perhaps a private, individual interrogation is warranted?”

“So it would seem,” Karikalan concurred. “The truth is, each of you has met and in turn, promptly been snared by the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani’s mesmerizing web of allure—which explains why you’re trying to swallow each other whole,” he gurgled with amusement.

Parthibendran’s face grew pinched with mingled indignation and disapproval. “Clearly, you’ve decided to make light of everything today, *Prabhu*,” he volunteered at last, with some difficulty. “Fair enough; know that I’ve been forced to this. I’ve suspicions of my own regarding Vandhiyathevan—of which I shall share the most important: your beloved brother plunged into the raging sea merely to save him from a burning ship, and here’s Vallavarayan, looking large as life and twice as natural, without broken limbs or even a

bruise—but what of your brother? Ask him his fate; if he's lost to sea, surely that's on this bastard?"

Karikalar turned to Vandhiyathevan with a raised brow. "Well?"

"Before I answer his questions, *Ayya*, I must kindly beg his reply to my own: It was he who escorted Ponniyin Selvar from Ilankai in his own vessel—this, against the protestations of both Chief Minister Aniruddhar and Senathipathi Boodhi Vikrama Kesari, who begged the prince to remain on the island—for Arulmozhi Varmar valued his elder brother's wishes more than theirs. Why, then, did the Pallava scion fail in his stated duty of bringing his royal charge home, safe? What on earth was he doing when Ponniyin Selvar braved the churning sea? Why stand by and watch as the prince dived in to save poor, pitiful me? Why must the courageous scion of the Pallava dynasty, a byword for valour dawdle about, twiddling his thumbs, instead of protecting Ponniyin Selvar? Why were he and his men just watching the sea take him?"

It was now Parthibendran's turn to splutter incoherently, face burning at the blunt questions. "*Ayya*, it appears that this—this fool is audacious enough to accuse me," he answered, trying in vain to control twitching limbs and trembling body. "Why, almost he seems to name me a murderer! I will not stomach these insults another moment—"

"As I said just now, Parthiba," Karikalan's eyes bored into those of his companion. "All three of you, my dear friends, are within moments of tearing each other from limb to limb—not that I blame you. I know, more than anyone else, the debilitating effect Pazhuvoor's Ilaiya Rani has on men. Now, you and Kandamaaran may ride at a slow pace just ahead, while I follow—I wish to listen to this one's account of his travels, not to mention divining the truth of the accusations leveled at him. On one count, though, you will not find me lenient: continued resentment amongst you. Strive to get along, for there's nothing that sets my back up more than to see you all at each other's throats."

Bereft of options, both Pallava and Kadambur princes duly clambered upon their steeds and set them in motion even as Azhwarkkadiyaan, an extremely interested bystander to these stirring events, sidled up to Vandhiyathevan. “Not bad at all, *Appane*,” he congratulated. “You’ve managed to skim across the conversation without blurting a passel of lies or dredging a bushel of truths. Well done!”

Naturally, Aditha Karikalan’s attention was caught by the new entrant. “Oh, and who might this be?” He demanded. “I seem to have seen you somewhere, at some time—”

“You have indeed, your highness. A few years ago.”

“Your voice seems familiar too.”

“Because you heard it three years ago, *Ayya*, at a most significant moment.”

Abruptly, Aditha Karikalan’s face darkened. “Significant moment, you say? Three years ago ...” A shadow seemed to flit across his features. “The voice I heard as I hunted my foe through the isles of River Vaikai? Could that even be?”

“It can and is, your highness. That voice belonged to me. I was, indeed, the one who crouched behind a tree, and revealed the hiding-place of your enemy.”

“Ah, what a terrifying day that was—to think of the manic frenzy that possessed me … my body shudders even now, at the very memory. But stay, why did you hide yourself in the forest, Vaishnavite? Why transform yourself into an *asareeri*, a disembodied voice?”

“You mentioned your frenzy just now, Sire, as well you might; you were hacking anyone in front of you into a hundred pieces. I, however, wished to retain my life yet awhile—”

“And that was the only reason, was it? Why not appear when I called for you? Why didn’t you show yourself when I screamed myself hoarse, asking for the “*asareeri* to make itself known to me; to reveal the way”?”

“For a simple reason: I didn’t wish to incur the burning hatred of my adopted sister; the girl I raised—Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani.”

“But it was perfectly acceptable for *me* to do so, was it?” Aditha Karikalan fairly growled. “You—you *chandaala*!” And he whipped out his fearsome sword in one smooth motion.

For the first time during the meeting, Vandhiyathevan found himself in the grip of real terror. Azhwarkkadiyaan was clearly done for, he assumed, but loyalty made him try to stall the inevitable bloodbath. “This Vaishnavite is an envoy of the Chief Minister, *Ayya*,” he threw himself into the breach, in as soothing a voice as possible. “Pray award him any punishment you choose—once you’ve heard his message.”

“Ah, what would be the point of punishing him? Or, indeed, anyone?” The prince returned his sword to the scabbard.

Unlike Vandhiyathevan, however, Azhwarkkadiyaan seemed unfazed in the face of Karikalan’s wrath; if anything, a mysterious smile played upon his lips. “I refused to make an appearance, your highness, for this very reason: your ire would turn upon me—as did that of my sister, who has refused all my pleas for an audience, so far. You, however, seem to have gained her forgiveness; isn’t Nandhini Devi’s loving, exquisitely framed invitation, her *thirumuga olai* the reason for your decision to partake of Kadambur hospitality?”

“And how could you possibly have known that, you rascal of a Vaishnavite?” Karikalan demanded.
“I am, as you know, Aniruddhar’s trusted servant, *Ayya*—and nothing, not the smallest, insignificant event can transpire in the

Chozha *rajyam* without the Chief Minister's knowledge."

"One of these days, I shall banish both you and your precious master from these borders, see if I don't," swore the prince. "But for now, get on to your horses and ride one each by my side; we may as well engage in conversation."

Chapter 13

Manimekalai's Heart

Within the section of the Kadambur palace set aside for royal guests, in a sumptuously decorated *anthappuram* chamber, upon a gloriously carved *sapramanjam* bed reclined Nandhini, herself lavishly adorned; a vision of loveliness; her face aglow with a sort of ethereal beauty. Half-lidded eyes revealed that she was indulging in some sort of daydream; beams of light—rays of sheer, unadulterated radiance seemed to gleam and flash like shards of lightning, each time her delicate black lids fluttered. She might have looked half asleep, but it was obvious that her mind was anything but, racing at light speed.

Observe even further, and you will note that her opaque stare wasn't opaque at all but focused upon a strategically placed *akhil-kundam*, an urn of fragrance. Languidly billowed dark, aromatic plumes from the vessel, curling and twirling into graceful eddies before rising even further and scattering into minute particles invisible to the eye. It's impossible to know what Nandhini divined in these fascinating fumes—but abruptly she released a deep sigh. "Indeed, my dreams are as this smoke, revealing themselves for a brief moment and disappearing without a trace," murmured her coral lips. "At least these plumes leave behind a pleasing fragrance—but my fantasies saddle me with nothing but sorrow, grief, dishonour and disrepute …"

"*Devi*?" came Manimekalai's low, sweet voice, at that moment. "*Devi*, may I come in?"

"By all means, *Amma*," Nandhini assented. "Surely you need no one's permission, least of all mine, to go where you please in your own home?"

The Kadambur princess pushed open the door and walked in, it must be admitted, gently—but sparkling eyes in a glowing face, a lively gait and enthusiastically waving hands betrayed her bubbling spirits; it seemed as though she bounded and leapt and practically danced her way into the chamber.

Nandhini straightened a smidgeon and gestured gracefully to the ivory seat beside the bed, in silent invitation.

“My brother has coached me most carefully regarding manners towards you, *Devi*,” Manimekalai informed gaily, once she’d seated herself. “There’s nothing he hasn’t mentioned when it comes to southern customs and breeding—he’s impressed upon me a thousand times that I oughtn’t to enter your rooms without knocking and receiving your permission—”

“Shush, my dear. Southerners can take their beloved breeding and dive off a cliff, for all I care; forget your brother’s strictures, do,” Nandhini assured her young host. “Don’t address me as *Devi* or *Maharani*—just a sweet *Akka* will do.”

“*Akka*, you won’t think my frequent visits a horrid nuisance, will you?”

“I certainly should—in which case, there’s only one solution: stay by my side at all times.” And Nandhini’s lips curved into an alluring smile.

Manimekalai stared at the Ilaiya Rani’s luminous face for a while, transfixed by her undeniable beauty. “Never have I seen a lovelier woman,” she murmured, after a while. “Not even in paintings have I glimpsed someone like—”

“Now, don’t *you* fall in love with me as well, my girl. The whole world has cast me in the role of a tempting seductress, a *mayamohini*—apparently, I snare every man who enters my orbit; such are the slurs anyway …”

“Let them—let anyone slight you in the slightest and I shan’t rest until I’ve cut out their tongue!” Manimekalai swore in the most gratifying way.

“There wouldn’t be any use. I’ve married an old man, after all—and must learn to endure endless abuse.”

“Indeed, it pains me too.” The Kadambur princess’s face grew pinched. “My brother lamented this sorry state of affairs as well, but surely that oughtn’t to allow anyone to say what they pleased?”

“I neither know nor care, Manimekalai. People dared to dishonour the virtuous Sita Devi as well—not that her reputation suffered from their malicious tongues. Be that as it may, let’s set aside my affairs for a moment, and discuss yours.”

“Mine, *Akka*?” Manimekalai paused. “But surely there’s nothing to speak of?”

“*Kalli*, you artful minx! Didn’t you make a point of telling me that you’d reveal your heart this evening?” Gently, Nandhini pinched the young maiden’s blooming cheeks.

“How I wish I could just stay with you all day, every day. If I were granted a *swayamvaram* and the world allowed women to marry each other—my garland shall certainly land around your neck!”

“It’s been hardly a whole day since we first met and here you are, already lavishing me with praise! I’m glad, though—long have I lamented my lack of an intimate female companion … after all, doesn’t the precious daughter of every lord of the realm hasten to fall at the feet of that Pazhaiyarai fiend? How fortunate that you, at least, remain at my side. But I must object to what you mentioned a moment ago, about women wedding women—such a thing has never occurred in this world. Marry you must and that, a man; there’s no other way.”

“What if I stayed a maiden, unmarried?”
“Never, my darling, not on your life! The world wouldn’t let you be; neither will your parents or your beloved brother. None of them shall rest until they’ve managed to literally tie you around some young man’s neck. And if that should be your eventual fate—who would you set your heart on? Tell me, won’t you?”

“If you’d just mention a name, *Akka* …”

“Fair enough. Now, would you choose to wed the very epitome of *sivabakthi*, Madhuranthaka Thevar? Or garland the very embodiment of valour, *veera dheera paraakramam*, Aditha Karikalar?”

Abruptly, as though she had suddenly been reminded of something, Manimekalai broke into merry peals of laughter.

“Such amusement, my dear,” murmured Nandhini. “Don’t think I’m mocking you, though—I’m in earnest and so is your brother; it was for this reason that he asked me here. In fact, you must tell me your preference soon, for Aditha Karikalar might arrive any moment. So will Kandamaaran, for that matter; I must share with him your choice of groom, for I promised him I would.”

“My choice … how could I possibly reveal my heart to you, *Akka*, when it won’t do so even to me?”

“In that case, at least tell me why you laughed,” Nandhini tried another tack.

“Merely that Madhuranthakar’s name reminded me of something. He arrived here four months ago, you know—without anyone’s knowledge, in your closed palanquin. Naturally, we, the *anthappuram* women were completely in the dark about his presence and were wondering when you, the Ilaiya Rani would visit and when you didn’t, puzzled over your absence. Didn’t you mention a moment ago that women couldn’t possibly marry into their own sex? That wouldn’t be true if I wedded Madhuranthakar, *Akka*.”

“I guessed that he wouldn’t be your choice, my dear,” Nandhini smiled slightly. “I intimated as much to your brother as well. In fact, Madhuranthakar is already married to my brother-in-law’s daughter. And she, well—! A more arrogant specimen of womanhood you couldn’t find; neither could you stand to share a home with her. In

which case …" she paused meaningfully. "I'm to assume that you've set your heart on Prince Karikalar?"

"I wouldn't, *Akka*. How could I—for I've never set eyes on him."

"Oh, my little innocent. Is there such a thing as meeting the man of their dreams, for women of royal blood? What about the endless stories, poems, myths and portraits they have heard and seen of their heroes, not to mention tales of their incredible feats—before promptly tumbling head over ears in love? Surely you must have known of such women?"

"Indeed; I'm no stranger to such fables. Of course, I've heard a great deal of Aditha Karikalar too—the whole world praises his splendid martial prowess … *Akka*, is it true that he chopped Veera Pandiyan's head in one blow?" Manimekalai prattled, artlessly.

Lost in her own thoughts, she was completely unaware of the sudden, terrifying transformation of Nandhini's countenance; the gruesome expression that flitted across her features. The Pazhuvoor queen averted her face for a few brief moments until her turmoil passed; by the time she turned towards Manimekalai, her countenance glowed as usual, with a devastating beauty that could stun onlookers. "But would that be considered valour, my dear?" She questioned demurely. "Surely that's nothing short of demonic?"

"How could that possibly be? I'm not sure I understand, *Akka*."

"Imagine this, if you will. A man very dear to you is being hunted by a terrible foe—your brother, perhaps, or the lover you dream of wedding. Imagine now that this man is severely wounded and unable to leave his bed—and this is the moment the enemy chooses to attack him; to raise a fearsome sword and behead him." The Ilaiya Rani paused. "Would you truly be impressed by the courage of such a one?"

“Such an unusual question, *Akka*,” Manimekalai mulled over it a while. “Still, I shall answer it as best as I can. If I should ever find myself in such a situation, I won’t stand by, wringing my hands; I shall snatch the foe’s sword and plunge it into his heart!”

“What a wonderful answer, my darling!” Nandhini surged forward and folded the young woman in an ardent embrace. “Ah, that such wits and intelligence should find a worthy protector, the right spouse—that’s what worries me, now. In fact, I’m not sure that even Aditha Karikalar would make you a fitting mate.”

“Neither do I. Frankly, whatever I’ve heard of him only frightens me, I admit.” Manimekalai bit her lips. “*Akka*, shall I reveal to you my secret? What resides in my heart of hearts?”

Chapter 14

"Will My Dreams Come True?"

Nandhini's slender fingers raised Manimekalai's delicate chin; her gaze pierced the young woman's large, limpid eyes, wide under the scrutiny.

"Far better that you don't open your heart to me, *Kanmani*. It hasn't been more than a day since you made my acquaintance—and shouldn't confidences be shared only with companions of long standing?"

"But that's how you seem to me, *Akka*—a tried and trusted friend of years. Somehow, I feel like revealing secrets I wouldn't dream of telling; ask questions I wouldn't dare put to others—"

"In that case, my heart, by all means."

"Are there such things as apparitions, *Akka*? Like those in fables and tales? Could they possibly be real? Is it possible, do you think, for us to see someone when they're not here?"

“Sometimes. When you love a person to distraction, you’d see them even when they’re not present. Of course, the same applies when you hate someone beyond all reason too—surely you’ve heard intriguing stories of wondrous Kannan? Even watched plays? His uncle Kamsan nursed such hatred for him that he saw visions of his nephew everywhere; he drew his sword against the apparition again and again, only to be dismayed and defeated. And then, there was the Gopika, the young maiden Nappinnai who was besotted with Krishnan—and wonder of wonders, *she* saw his divine form everywhere too! Pillars, trees and the river in flood reminded her of him so much that she tried to embrace them all, in vain! *Adiye*, Manimekalai,” Nandhini’s eyes twinkled. “Now who might he be, this *maya* Kannan who’s consumed all your attention and driven you to distraction?”

“I saw him for the first time four months ago, *Akka*—but I’d heard a great deal about him before, from my *thamaiyan* Kandamaaran. Not that his form ever appeared then but after that meeting, he’d emerge in my dreams frequently and sometimes, materialize in front of me during the day—so lifelike too …”

“Let me guess: you glimpsed that trickster’s phantom form yesterday too, didn’t you?”

“Why, yes! But how did you guess?”

“Hasn’t anyone ever mentioned that I possess *mandhira sakthi*, a talent for spells?”

“I’ve certainly been told so, but—is it true indeed?”

“You may test my skills, if you wish: this young, handsome hero, the *youvana sundara purushan*, the man of manifold charms who’s stolen your tender heart—shall I reveal his identity?”

“Do, do; I can’t bring myself to say his name, either.”

“Too bashful?” Nandhini closed her eyes and stayed still for a few moments, as though in meditation. “Your beloved is Vallavarayan Vandhiyathevan of the Vaanar clan, isn’t he?”

“It’s true—you do possess the gift of magic!” Manimekalai exclaimed.

“Oh, my girl,” Nandhini sighed. “When it’s so obvious that you’ve lost your heart to him—why not reveal all this to Kandamaaran? Why tantalize Madhuranthakar with marriage prospects? Why drag Karikalar all the way here upon a fool’s errand—and why insist upon my presence, on quite an unnecessary enterprise?”

“My brother dislikes him, *Akka*.”

“Well, here’s a pretty tale! Is it his wedding under discussion? But stay—didn’t you mention that Kandamaaran had been the one to speak of the man? And brought him to meet you, in the first place?”

“Yes indeed to both, but his sentiments underwent a change, and for a reason: *Akka*, he—in Thanjavur, he seems to have stabbed my brother in the back! Did Kandamaaran truly spend days abed in your palace, injured and unable to even move? Is it true that he couldn’t have survived without your devoted nursing?”

“Clearly your brother is prone to exaggeration of my poor skills. Be that as it may—what do you propose to do, now? Now that your heart’s beloved has so clearly turned out to be your sibling’s enemy?”

“But if you listened to what *he* said, *Akka*—”

“He? He who?”

“He—the, the one you named just now—him, of course. He swears that he never stabbed Kandamaaran; that someone else did this foul

deed and dumped him by Thanjai's fort walls, and that he carried him to safety …"

"And when, pray, did he make you his confidante?"

"Yesterday."

"Then—did you meet him face to face? I thought you mentioned something about phantoms?"

"To tell the truth, that confuses me the most. What did I actually see—him, or his spectral form? Yesterday's events seem rather vague and dreamlike when I think about them … *Akka*, is it true that when people die, sometimes their spirits appear and speak to us?" And Manimekalai's voice quavered with boundless terror.

A terror that seemed contagious, as Nandhini's slender form trembled like a leaf, as well. "Indeed, I know for a fact that those who die gruesome deaths before their time haunt the living," she murmured, eyes staring vacantly at some point in the ceiling. "If they've been decapitated, the head floats about by itself, sometimes; sometimes just the body—or they each come separately, and demand from you a bloody revenge!" Abruptly, she swiveled towards the maiden. "Good God, girl, why ask me these questions?" Her voice rose, rather shrill. "You don't fear that your lover has met such a fate, do you? Who on earth put you up to this?"

"This palace possesses a clairvoyant, *Akka*, and I summoned him—but someone seems to have beaten him up last night, and it was his wife, the Devaratti, who came in his place. She said—"

"*Chee*, don't believe a word of her nonsense!"

"I didn't. After all, you can't possibly touch a ghost, can you?"

"Neither spirit nor spectral form. But why ask? You didn't actually touch the man of your dreams yesterday, did you?"

“That—that’s what puzzles me. It seems to me I did—but when I recall certain other events yesterday, I can’t help but doubt my own memory—”

“Tell me everything, my girl, and I’ll see if I can untangle this knotty problem.”

Encouraged thus, Manimekalai lost no time in availing the invitation to unburden herself. “Very well, *Akka*. And if I seem muddled or get my facts jumbled, pray don’t hesitate to question me for clarification,” she offered, before continuing. “I was in this very room at around this time yesterday, making sure that the maids had arranged the chambers to suit your every requirement, according to my brother’s exact instructions. I walked towards this mirror once to check my reflection—”

“Gloat over your own beauty, you mean.”

“Hardly, *Akka*. I’m under no illusions about my face.”

“And what, pray, is the criticism towards it? Your features lack nothing; wouldn’t celestial beauties such as Rathi, Indrani, Menakai and Oorvasi burn in jealousy at your charming countenance?”

“None of them would equal the dust at your feet, *Akka*.”

“Be that as it may, go on. You were gazing at your reflection …”

“… when I suddenly caught sight of another face in the mirror—quite close to mine too.”

“Your beloved’s, I suppose?”

“Yes and I almost jumped out of my skin—”

“Why, though? You did mention that you’d seen him often in your dreams.”

“But it was different this time. You see, then, his form would always appear at a distance; his apparition too. Here, though, it was as though from behind … forgive me, I’m too ashamed to even begin to describe—”

“Never mind that; go on, you little minx.”

“It felt as though he were tiptoeing from behind to—to kiss me. I jumped and looked around, but there was no one. There was nothing in the mirror either. Suddenly, a suspicion occurred to me. I showed you the secret opening that leads to the hunting trophy chamber right next door, didn’t I? Yesterday, the mirror had been placed in front of it—and so it occurred to me that someone might have opened the entrance and looked out from within the *vettai mandapam*. I tried to banish the thought; there was no chance of an intruder within the palace … but my doubts persisted; I opened the secret entrance and stepped into the chamber—”

By now, Nandhini had sat up, her interest in the tale considerably heightened. “And? Was the thief hidden within? Has he been caught?"

“A thief, *Akka*? You’d call him that?”

“Only because he’s stolen your heart, my dear. Well? Was he in the *vettai mandapam*?”

“Wonder of wonders—he wasn’t! But someone else was: our palace servant Idumbankaari, cleaning the chamber and do you know, he’s got a face like one of those gruesome guardian deities, the *Kaduvetti Karuppan* looming balefully outside Ayyanaar shrines … anyway, I asked him if someone had come by, and he was adamant in his denial.”

“Think he was lying, do you?”

“I don’t know about that, but it did seem to me that someone else was hidden in the chamber. I decided that whatever trickery was being carried on would come to light on its own, and returned to this room.”

“And did it? Come to light, I mean.”

“Do listen: My ears were pricked, eager to pick up the slightest sound of conversation—and they did! And then crashing noises, as though something had fallen. Even as I was wondering about my next course of action, this door shifted a little. I blew out the lamp, and waited. There’s a tiny, round opening set within the door, and a figure opened it, trying to get through. “Help—*abayam*! I need help,” came a frantic call. Both voice and figure seemed to resemble his, and so I dragged him into the room, kindled the light … and it *was* him!”

“Good heavens, Manimekalai, what an extraordinary tale—just like the magical fables of King Vikramadithan!”

“That’s not all, *Akka*. Naturally, my heart swelled with emotion; my body thrilled with exhilaration at the very sight of one I’d gazed upon in my dreams for four months—but I assumed a mock angry demeanour. *How dare you make a sly entrance into the sacred precincts of the anthappuram*? I demanded, and he replied that he was being pursued. *So you’re a coward, running for your life*? I taunted him, and he explained, looking mortified, that he was unarmed. It was only after this that I opened the subject of him stabbing my brother in the back—but he denied it outright, *Akka*.”

“And you fell all over yourself to believe him, of course?”

“Well, he was very believable then—but thinking over everything that happened next, I’m not quite sure what I can or can’t believe…”

“Do you mean to say that the mysteries didn’t cease?”

“I was on alert even as I was speaking to him, straining with one ear to hear anything from the hunting trophy chamber next door—and there were definitely the jumbled noises of people walking about, and the rumble of voices. It seemed to me that he might have been right about attackers bent on murdering him, and—hark, *Akka*! At that moment, this poor, pitiful heart of mine could resolve upon nothing more than to save him. I determined to find out the identity of his assassins—and if Idumbankaari was tangled in this web of deceit, in some way. Was he his—you know, my—his accomplice? Or the assassins’? Also, I was alarmed that this so-called secret passage wasn’t all that secret after all—and when I realized that you would be the occupant of this room, my fear ratcheted to pure terror. I didn’t dare inform my father; if the slightest whisper of my—*his* presence in the *anthappuram* reached his ears, I couldn’t guarantee the continued existence of his life. I had but one choice and I acted upon it: I bade him stay where he was and stepped into the *vettai mandapam* to determine the identity of the newcomers myself.

“Inside stood five or six men, in various corners, by the wall. They seemed stunned at my presence and I was rather frightened by theirs, to be honest. I cloaked my fear under outrage, and opened my mouth to demand the reason for such trespassing … when Chandramathi entered the room through another door, calling aloud for me. The thought flashed through my mind that he was still in the room; she might stumble into him and raise the alarm—so I turned back, consigning my investigation to a later time—and managed to drag my maid-companion into the room as well. Imagine my horror when I discovered *him* gone—vanished without a trace! I asked Chandramathi if she’d seen anyone, but she was vehement in her denial. I looked around for a while, and went into the *vettai mandapam* once more. There was another surprise in store for me—none of the men I’d seen earlier were there either! I demanded of Idumbankaari where they’d disappeared—and he swore up and down that no one had ever been there! I couldn’t begin to believe

this … and Chandramathi began to tease me in right earnest. *You've been afflicted by sithabramai Akka, or you wouldn't be imagining men where there are none*!

"Then she informed me that you and your retinue were rapidly approaching the fortress gates, and that Father had bidden my presence for the welcome party. I obeyed his summons at once. In an attempt to hasten, I hurried along the passage she'd taken, crossed two sections of the palace, climbed the stairs and crossed the upper galleries … when once again, I happened to witness something truly astonishing: the Vaanar warrior was striding across the moon courtyard and walking alongside the fort-wall! Even as I watched, he vaulted to the top with a bamboo pole, and was over the *madhil* in an instant. Or at least, that's how it seemed to me—but everything was so outlandish and astonishing that I still can't quite work out if it was all true or just my *sithabramai*, a figment of my panicking, overwrought mind—"

Nandhini stayed silent for a while, lost in thought. Unbidden rose the memory of the two shadowy faces she had glimpsed through the gloomy trees surrounding the fort, the evening before—along with the knowledge that cavalrymen had been sent after them. The question was, had the two unknowns been apprehended? And if so, would they be dragged here?

"What do *you* think, *Akka*?" Manimekalai's question jolted the Pazhuvoor Queen out of her reverie.

"Think, my dear? If you really wished to know—intoxicating love has well and truly gone to your head."

"Like Chandramathi, you too mock me."

"Not at all, my girl. But if you, who were actually at the scene, cannot quite know if everything was real, a dream or a hallucination, then how can I …" Nandhini's voice trailed away. "Wait—there isn't another secret way out of this room, is there?"

“None that I know of, *Akka*.”

“Couldn’t he have gone the same way as you and your companion?”

“Without the knowledge of a dozen maids littering the passages? Impossible.”

“A mystery indeed. And—you didn’t breathe a word of any of this to your father?”

“No. I felt too bashful and fearful at the very thought. Besides, what if he really had been here—”

“Your discretion is to be praised. You’re right about not telling the men-folk; not that they’d understand the ramifications anyway.”

“In fact, I was wondering if I ought to mention anything to my brother —”

“A decision that would undoubtedly end in pandemonium, as his only ambition at this moment is to get you shackled to Karikalan.”

“Pray, pray help me *Akka*—you’re the only one you can. Kandamaaran practically worships you—he’d listen to you …”

“Why, you artful little minx! You ask me to intercede for a cause that directly contradicts the one I’m supposed to support … but listen: assuming that the splendid plans to wed you to the crown prince come to naught, where’s the guarantee that your own would succeed? You know nothing of him after all; how can you be sure that he’d love you?”

“If you must know the truth, that doesn’t really matter. Whether or not he loves me—”

“And there, in that sentence, lies the very destiny of womanhood, my dear; a destiny that forces us to bend and submit to men, to sacrifice our lives for their happiness no matter our inclinations. Nevertheless, let’s see how your own fortune treats you. But should there be a repetition of mysterious happenings, you’ll let me know, won’t you?”

“Who else would I share my experiences with, *Akka*? And now that you’ve reminded me, I should like to recount to you a dream of mine, last night—”

“As if it weren’t enough that you dream all day, I suppose. What now? He didn’t leave you in the lurch once again, did he?”

“No, not at all. This is something else altogether—so terrifying that I shudder to even think of it. *Akka,* is it true that our dreams during the day will come true?”

“You’d better describe it, first. But wait—you mentioned that it was something else—did you dream of anyone other than him?”

“No, only about—well, him. It seemed to me as though he was about to be stabbed, but he had no weapons on him. A dazzling knife lay on the floor; I snatched it and leapt forward—I wanted to stab his attacker before he could harm him. But when I was close, I looked into the assassin’s face and discovered that it was my brother Kandamaaran! I woke up screaming, bathed in perspiration … my body shook uncontrollably for a long time, after—it was so real, this dream. *Akka* …” Manimekalai paused, her face convulsed with fear. “Will it—will it come true?”

“Oh, my dear. Your mind is certainly muddled to the high heavens,” Nandhini sighed. “You wonder if real events were a hallucination—and if nightmares were real! What a wonderful friend you’re turning out, to be sure: your madness seems to eclipse mine—”

“They’re almost here,” Chandramathi entered at this moment, interrupting the conversation. “Word is that they’ve crossed the

Veeranarayana Lake.”

Chapter 15

A Right Royal Welcome

That evening, the entrance to Kadambur Sambuvaraiyar's palace saw glorious sights hitherto unseen. People stood practically cheek by jowl as far as the eye could see—men, women, children and even doddering old citizens.

People far too old to even contemplate such excursions and unable to stand on aging, quivering limbs, stood firm with the help of trusty staffs, jostling for space on unsteady legs, eager for a glimpse, just one glimpse of valorous Aditha Karikalar's regal visage. Children, uncaring of their small forms being crushed to death in the milling throng, nearly stampeded to the front, eager for their share of the spectacle. Young women pushed and pulled forward amongst strange men, their natural bashfulness completely forgotten—and those selfsame strange men, many in their prime, completely ignored the nubile young women threading through their numbers and spent precious moments trying to secure the best vantage points to stare at the crown prince; not an iota of their attention strayed to the ladies, not even to "dart glances from the corner of their eyes," as poets were wont to describe. Some even went to the extent of climbing strategically up trees dotting the boundaries of the Kadambur fort; others tried in vain to one up them, clambering up the fort-wall itself—only to be shoved off by dutiful sentries.

Young mothers battled for space amidst the heaving crowds, their children hoisted precariously on their hips. "Now, now, do not cry, darling," they tried to soothe the wailing babies. "The pride of valiant Thamizhagam, the bravest and most courageous warrior among warriors, Aditha Karikalar *Who Claimed the head of Veera Pandiyan*

is about to arrive—and just the sight of him may bless you with valour; you too may become such a warrior some day!" They were not the only ones: lovers spoke to their beloveds and mothers to sons in much the same vein.

And why not? Such was the crown prince's fame; his reputation for sheer bravery had spread far and wide; all of Thamizhagam sang the praises of a youngster who had entered gruesome battlefields at the tender age of twelve wielding a broadsword that hacked enemies into pieces; beat the Pandiyan army into ignominious retreat at Sevur, sending the king scurrying into a rocky cave amidst the harsh, unforgiving desert wastes of Pandiya Nadu; hunted down the selfsame enemy at nineteen, battering his much-vaunted *Abathudhavis*, rootling into his hidey-hole, dragging out and cleaving head from neck in one blow … who wouldn't wait on tenterhooks to catch a glimpse of such a puissant prince?

Many were the rumours that had sprouted about him, however, in the last three or four years, spreading wild roots throughout the landscape. Some opined that he and Sundara Chozhar had had a falling out immediately after his coronation as crown prince, and the Chakravarthy had reservations about his firstborn's eventual succession to the throne. Some ventured a knowledgeable theory that Aditha Karikalar wished to establish a splendid, independent empire in Kanchi, just as in the glory days of old, when the illustrious Pallavas held sway. Others were certain that the Chakravarthy's obvious partiality for Arulmozhi Varman had roused a storm of jealousy in Karikalar's breast; still others were equally vehement in refuting such an outrageous theory, claiming that never could be found brothers who were more of one mind than these two. There were a few who raised concerns about the crown prince's as-yet-unmarried state; some loudly argued that his desire to wed and set a priest's daughter on the throne as queen, rather than a highborn princess had been the source of tension between father and son, while still others were convinced that magicians from Pandiya Nadu had used their spells and curses to turn the prince into a raving lunatic—which was why the various Chozha lords and chieftains

harboured great reluctance in allowing him to ascend the throne upon the Chakravarthy's death.

However that may be, there was no doubt that Chozha citizens cherished an immense desire to see him in person; news of his impending arrival in Kadambur had energized the surrounding region so much that a permanent thrill of excitement seemed to thrum amongst the people. When it was learnt that he would arrive that very evening—ah, words cannot describe the near stampede that occurred, as men and women from villages and towns for at least two *kaadhams* converged upon the fort.

To call this heaving, jostling crowd a veritable sea of humanity would be no exaggeration. The babble of voices rising and mingling in the air from a hundred thousand throats blended in a confused roar that sounded very like a passionate, deafening ocean. Palace sentries stood in formation, providing a makeshift path at the fort's front entrance in expectation of the prince's cavalcade: the sight of over-eager members of the public often pushing against them, occasionally overrunning the passage while being thrust back simultaneously by the guards closely resembled colossal waves breaking upon, and then swiftly receding from the shore.

Suddenly, a vigilant watcher atop a tree set up a shout. "Here they come!"

Immediately rose a thousand voices as one: "Where? Where?"

A stallion galloped up without the slightest concern for the gathered public—and the people on either side scrambled to give way, almost crushing each other in a desperate bid to escape its pounding hooves. "Young Sambuvaraiyan!" rose a chorus of shouts.

Indeed, the new arrival was Kandamaaran himself. He rattled up to the fort entrance at breakneck speed without a word of acknowledgement to the questions pelted at him, and jumped down at the gates.

“The prince is almost here,” he blurted breathlessly, folding his palms in deference to Pazhuvettarayar and Sambuvaraiyar, already there in readiness. “But his wits aren’t quite … all there. His anger flares up without warning. I arrived first to caution you. It’s essential that we present our best efforts at imperial hospitality—and ignore every word he utters with hostility—” Without pausing for their reply, he craned his neck towards the upper balconies of the front entrance *gopuram*. The congregation of royal ladies caught his eye, and he breezed past the entrance at once, bounding up the stairs by the side.

Once upstairs, his gaze ignored the rest and focused unerringly on Nandhini. “*Devi*, I’ve fulfilled your desire,” he said breathlessly, as he strode up to her. “He’s almost here—but I’m not sure how we can handle him; he’s like the proverbial mad elephant!”

“Surely that doesn’t matter, *Ayya*, when we’re armed with the perfect weapons to subdue him?” Nandhini looked demure. “The two *angusams* that are your sister’s beautiful eyes?”

“*Akka*, what sort of talk is this?” Manimekalai objected.

“There’s hardly anything objectionable in the Pazhuvoor Queen’s words, Sister,” Kandamaaran chimed in without missing a beat. “Surely you ought to have performed a score of penances to have a warrior of warriors such as Aditha Karikalar for a husband?”

“*Ayya*,” Nandhini interjected before Manimekalai could reply. “Is anyone accompanying the prince?”

“Two, actually: Parthibendra Pallavan and Vandhiyathevan.”

The Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani darted a glance full of meaning at her young friend. “Vandhiyathevan? The one you called your friend?”

“Oh yes, indeed—my dearest, most beloved friend who tried to murder me with a brutal stab in the back. I’ve no idea how or why, but he bounced up from somewhere and joined us along the banks of the Vellaaru. If it hadn’t been for the prince’s feelings, I might have sacrificed him to my knife then and there!”

Manimekalai’s face grew pinched. “If it’s true that he stabbed you, *Anna*,” she broke in, brows furrowed. “Why allow him into the palace at all?”

“Quiet now, darling; these are matters for men,” Nandhini cut in, smoothly. “Hurl blows at each other one day; hug the next—that’s their way.”

“Hardly,” Kandamaaran smiled. “All I care about is the prince’s goodwill … ah, you’ve gathered blooms by the basketful! Showers of flowers upon his royal highness and his blazing anger would dissipate; he’d be calm in an instant—oh, there they are! I must welcome them—” And he was down the stairs on the word.

The sight from the *mael maadam*, the upper balconies was nothing short of awe-inspiring: down below, amidst the heaving sea of humans seemed to appear, at one end, a swirling whirlpool as though churned by a whirlwind—and in its centre, like a small boat struggling against the treacherous currents were three horses and their riders, struggling against the jostling mass one moment, submerging underneath their crashing waves the next. The swirling vortex was gradually pushed towards the fort entrance, and was finally at the very gates. The three warriors on horseback were none other than Aditha Karikalar, Parthibendran and Vandhiyathevan, of course. Their impressive retinue, consisting of elephants, horses and men had been left behind practically leagues ago, their progress barred by the ocean of humanity.

The moment the stallions halted at the palace gates, a massive din erupted as twenty *perigais*, two hundred horns, three hundred *thaarais* and five hundred *thambattams* roared deafeningly, quieting

even the uproarious crowds somewhat. The instruments raised the skies for a few moments—and then stopped abruptly, allowing, in the resulting silence, the *kattiyakkaaran*, the royal crier, to ascend the platform on the upper balcony and address the gathering.

“Make way! The scion of illustrious Manu Manthatha, borne of the Surya dynasty—a descendent of Sibi Chakravarthy, the Pure-heart who cut out his own flesh for a dove; his son Rajakesari; his son Parakesari; great Manuneedhi Chozhan, who sacrificed his own son to deliver justice to a cow; Karikal Peruvalathan, glorious ancestor who raised the Tiger flag in the hoary Himalayas; Nalankilli; Nedunkilli; Perunarkilli; Killi Valavan, who embraced death in Kulamutram; Killi Valavan, who ascended to heaven in Kuraapalli; Kopperum Chozhar of the famed seventy-two Siva shrines—Pazhaiyarai’s Vijayalayar, he of ninety-six war wounds, valorous son of these puissant monarchs—his valiant son Adithya Chozhar, who raised eighty-two sacred shrines along the Kaveri from the Sasya Hills to the city of Puhaar, in a bid to sing Siva Peruman’s praises—his son Paranthaka Chakravarthy, he of the famed golden roof upon Thillai Ambalam, who vanquished Madurai and Eezham—his son Arinjaya Thevar, warrior of warriors who died at Atrur, having massacred the demon hordes of Rettai Mandalam’s Kannara Thevan—his son Paranthaka Sundara Chozha Chakravarthy, who rules over an empire that stretches from Eezham to Seetpuli Nadu—his firstborn—his illustrious son, *kopperumaganaar*—the *Vadathisai Maathanda Naayakar*, Chief of the Northern Armed Forces—He Who Beheaded Veera Pandiyan—Aditha Karikalar arrives—make way! *Paraak*! *Paraak*!” And it was as though lightning flashed, thunder crashed and a storm had broken over the assembly’s collective heads, deafening everyone.

The next instant, another *kattiyakkaaran* took up the tale: “The king of Kolli—illustrious warrior Valvil Ori, who killed a lion; a bear; a deer and a boar with just one arrow—his descendent, several generations past, Rajathi Raja, Raja Marthanda, Veera Gambeera Sambuvaraiyan—Eternal ally to the Chozha Chakravarthy—Guardian of the Veera Narayana Lake—*Thanda Naayakan* of the

Valiant Five Thousand—begs the favour of *kopperumaganaar*, the illustrious Aditha Karikalar's presence in his humble palace with all his heart, soul, word and worldly resources—and extends the gracious scion of the Chozhas a right royal welcome—may it be so!"

The moment his deafening voice stopped, poured a fragrant shower of flowers from the balconies. Aditha Karikalan and Vandhiyathevan immediately glanced up. Amidst the many women gathered, the Vaanar warrior caught sight of Manimekalai's charming face with its open, unreserved smile—and despite himself, returned it. The next instant, as though realizing his error in judgment, he averted his face pointedly and stared elsewhere.

Aditha Karikalan's sullen countenance, on the other hand, darkened even further when he glanced towards the *mael maadam*; he sprang down from his horse. The other two followed suit—and the instruments, which had taken a brief pause until then, began blaring at full pitch again. The ocean of humanity swirling around them resumed its excited roar as well; the royal visitors and welcoming party took this as a signal to stride through the gates, which slammed shut at once: *padaar*! *Padaar*!

"But why this haste?" Aditha Karikalan turned to see the barred entrance. "They're not scheming to imprison me here as they've done the Chakravarthy in Thanjai, are they? What of my retinue?" He demanded.

The two older men stood stock-still, paralyzed.

"*Komagane*," Pazhuvettarayar it was, who regained his composure first. "While this ancient Chozha *rajyam*, with its lakhs and lakhs of subjects has imprisoned you and your honoured father in its heart—why hold you captive elsewhere?"

"Pray consider, your highness, the plight of this small hut should it be invaded by the hordes of people eager for a glimpse of your sacred self," soothed Sambuvaraiyar. "The groves surrounding the fort

already resemble the fabled Madhuvanam destroyed by monkeys, even as they wait outside … but please be assured that once they've dispersed, all efforts shall be made to escort your entourage within. Until then, there are servants enough in my mansion to attend to all your needs—"

By this time, the uproar from the throngs outside seemed to have increased exponentially, and Aditha Karikalan turned to Kandamaaran. "Where's the way to the front entrance's *mael maadam*?"

The younger man pointed towards the steps and the crown prince strode swiftly in that direction, while his erstwhile companions followed.

"What on earth—?" Sambuvaraiyar turned to his peer. "It seems like we have bought and bundled a throwaway nuisance into our waistcloths—he does not appear to be in possession of his senses! And all this, trusting the judgment of feckless youngsters …"

"What could possibly go wrong? If the mission proceeds as planned, well and good but if it does not, no matter."

"It isn't the mission I am worried about so much as the visit itself; what if things should go haywire whilst he stays in my home? The omens are disconcerting and as for him—as well host a crazed elephant! Witnessed the wrathful face and vicious words?"

"Nothing we can do except to grin and bear it for a while. Hopefully, Pallavan Parthibendran will help to rein him—but what I loathe is the presence of that other wicked wretch right behind; I even suspect him of being a spy. Wasn't he here the night we met, all those months ago? And he was the one skulking behind the trees outside the fort last evening as well!"

"Surely there is no cause to worry? He is my son's friend, after all. Now, why have they hastened towards the women? Ought we to

follow?”

Parthibendran, who had dogged his master’s steps until the staircase now retraced his steps towards the two great lords—and caught the tail-end of Sambuvaraiyar’s speech.

“Whatever concerns you may have about the prince, *Ayya*, women needn’t be one because he never even glances at them,” he assured.

“If that be the case,” Pazhuvettarayar smiled sardonically. “How is our purpose to be achieved?”

“That, I’m afraid, depends on the fortunes of Sambuvaraiyar’s illustrious daughter and Chozha *samrajyam*.”

“Leaving aside Manimekalai’s fortunes for the moment, Parthibendra, answer me this: why the prince’s sullen, infuriated countenance just setting foot within? Why the devious, provocative remarks?” questioned Sambuvaraiyar. “I am beginning to feel that I cannot rest in peace until you escort him from here, safe and sound …”

“He was in fine fettle until we reached the banks of the Vellaaru; in good humour, even excellent spirits, I should say—until Vandhiyathevan and a certain Vaishnavite joined us. They must have said something to him; his mood certainly soured after.”

“So we thought—but what can be done, now? That wretched, wicked rascal is a part of the retinue, after all—”

“Pray preserve your patience; I shall take care of everything. I’ve a bone to pick with that scoundrel in any case; I’ll find the right time to even scores,” swore Parthibendran.

When Karikalan and the other two reached the upper balconies, it was to encounter the bevy of royal ladies descending the stairs.

“Really Kandamaaraa, how could you? To make the mothers wait thus—such heights of impertinence!” the crown prince chided his young host. “Surely it ought to be us, waiting upon their pleasure, offering our respects with folded hands …” he suited action to words, standing aside and bowing to the ladies, asking Kandamaaran the identity of each as they passed him by. When it was Nandhini’s turn …

“Oh, the Young Grandmother of Pazhuvoor!” he burst out, feigning astonished gratification. “And is she really here? How wonderful!”

The Ilaiya Rani cast him a keen glance from large, piercing eyes as she walked past, but not a word did she utter.

Karikalan’s body trembled a little at the potency of her level gaze, but he made a valiant effort to master himself, and succeeded somewhat. “Oho—and this must be your sister Manimekalai,” he murmured at the young woman who came next. “Ah, the finest portrait of a celestial *gandharva* goddess at the hands of a divine artist. We ought to find an excellent groom worthy of her—”

Manimekalai’s cheeks dimpled with bashfulness; she darted a glance at Vandhiyathevan out of the corner of her eyes and practically sped down the stairs.

Once they had dispersed to the last woman, Aditha Karikalan strode up to the façade of the *mael maadam*. The massive crowd below that had just begun to drift away, caught sight of him; an enthusiastic din arose. People began to draw towards the fortress gates again.

The crown prince noticed the *kattiyakkaaran* still standing upon the long platform that extended independent of the upper balconies, and made a sign for him to approach. Once he did so, Karikalan gave him a few messages, to be announced to the public. The town-crier duly returned to the platform, sounded the *perigai* a few times in preamble to his speech and gestured to the crowd to maintain

silence. Having repeated a few of Aditha Karikalar's titles and honours, he smoothly transitioned to the subject on hand. "And such a puissant prince, the most noble son of the Chakravarthy, the scion of the illustrious Chozhas, shall dwell in Kadambur palace for at least a week or ten days, gracing the surrounding towns and villages. And further," the *kattiyakkaaran's* voice boomed. "He shall visit the people as well, and make certain to hear their pleas and complaints to the full!"

That was it! Such pandemonium broke out amongst the crowds that it put to shame the earlier din; the latter seemed like silence in comparison to the deafening boom that arose now. Enthusiastic shouts; chants of admiration and sharp applause rang out, blended and spread so far and wide that they drowned out the sound of water gushing through all seventy-four canals of the Veera Narayana Lake.

Aditha Karikalan approached Sambuvaraiyar, Pazhuvettarayar and Parthibendran, who were still standing where they had, all this time. "But why've *you* stayed behind, Parthibendra?" He asked. "You haven't started conspiring with these *kizhavars* in your turn, have you?"

Startled out of their wits, said *kizhavars* stared at Aditha Karikalan's face, which was wreathed in a smile.

This time, it was Sambuvaraiyar who managed to collect his scattered wits. "You mentioned prison a while ago, *Komagane*; now you speak of plots—but I swear to you, here and now: not the slightest harm shall befall you while you remain under my roof, in my pitiful hut. But if, God forbid, anything should, my life shall have departed my body long before!"

"Do you truly believe that I fear for my life, *Ayya*? Why would I when I'm among beloved friends, when I didn't do so even amidst lakhs of Pandiya enemies? But pray, *pray* don't refer to your palace as a hut —for, *aha*, how towering the *madhil* walls? How deep? Why, they'd seem to eclipse the strength of even Thanjai's defenses! I'm quite

curious: which enemy did you intend to keep out with such secure fortifications?”

“We have none of our own, your highness. Chozha foes are our foes; their friends, ours.”

“Your oath delights me, but you might communicate your chivalrous sentiments to your son; he appears to consider my friend the Vaanar prince his sworn enemy. Surely that’s a very serious mistake?”

Kandamaaran lowered his head at this comment, mortified.

Chapter 16

“Malayaman’s Misgivings”

Gazing with deep interest here and there, Karikalan walked along the moon courtyard between mansion and *madhil*, guided by Kandamaaran, while the other four followed faithfully—and came to a halt when he caught sight of a stage set for performances and temporary shelter for an audience.

“Oh, what’s all this? What’s about to happen here?”

“If it be your pleasure, *Komagane*, a *kuravai koothu*—”

“Aha, wonderful! By all means, plan one. Or a *villuppaattu*; even plays and drama on Karikal Valavar and Vijayalaya Chozhar while you’re at it. All our daylight hours shall be spent hunting in the forests while our nights, in pursuit of music and the arts. Do you know my grandfather Malayaman’s parting message to me, *Sambuvaraiyare*? *Do not ever sleep at night in the Kadambur palace!* And do you know

my reply? *I sleep neither during the day nor night; it has been three years since my eyes closed in slumber. Have no fear that my enemies might harm me as I rest; their only chance might be when I'm awake—and where exists the man with courage enough to attempt such a thing*? How's that for reassuring Malayaman?" And Aditha Karikalan broke into a cackle of laughter.

"Whether you are awake, *Ayya*, or—or asleep …" Sambuvaraiyar's voice shook with barely controlled fury. "None will ever dare intend assault as long as … as you are under this roof—"

"Who indeed within Kadambur Sambuvaraiyar's mansion, or even from outside, braving these massive *madhil* walls that reach to the high heavens? Not Yaman, for even the God of Death fears the lord of this castle, doesn't He? I merely mentioned the Thirukkovilur *kizhavar*'s entirely needless concerns; a doddering old man isn't he? Some, you know, rather lack courage in the twilight of their life. Unlike my Pazhuvoor *Paattan* now, striding right briskly by our side—you couldn't ever mistake him for someone who will never see sixty again, will you?" The Crown prince allowed himself a chuckle.

Periya Pazhuvettarayar cleared his throat with the intention of answering this sally, but the sound echoed across the expanse like a lion's throaty growl.

"Ah, and here's proof of my claim! They say that the world trembles when warrior Pazhuvettarayar clears his throat—how utterly true! Think, Kandamaaraa, Vandhiyatheva, Parthibendra, if you will all be quite so healthy and robust at his ripe old age. You may clear your throats, perhaps, but you certainly won't be in any case to introduce a new young woman into the *anthappuram*. It appears that you've brought the Ilaiya Rani with you, *Thaatha*, for I glimpsed her in the *mael maadam*; how did she travel here, pray? A closed palanquin? A chariot? Or another vehicle?"

"We escorted her," Periya Pazhuvettarayar interjected. "In an *ambaari* upon an elephant in full view of the country and citizens," he

finished with unmistakable pride.

“Now *that’s* how you do it! Pray continue this estimable practice in the future as well, *Thaatha*. A closed palanquin doesn’t always quite answer the purpose; quite the opposite, in fact—it gives rise, I fear, to a great many ribald rumours. Listen to this choice tidbit that came to my ears, I beg: it appears that my chithappa Madhuranthakan often shuts himself up in the young queen’s *pallakku* and gallivants around the kingdom!” And Aditha Karikalan exploded into deafening peals of uncontrollable mirth …

… a mirth which found no echo, apparently, in his rather appalled audience. Each of their hearts, if anything, harboured stricken emotions in varying degrees.

Ayyo, what a monumental blunder have I committed in blurting everything to this maniac, Vandhiyathevan mulled, indulging in an orgy of self-flagellation. *It looks like he’s going to expose every single secret without exception!*

As for Periya Pazhuvettarayar, his heart resembled a hellish volcano: a seething, boiling and churning sea of molten magma and liquid lava—and the sound he made, clearing his throat to answer, sounded very much like the terrifying rumble before a volcanic eruption of flames and scorching smoke.

But someone else sacrificed himself upon the noble altar of the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani’s defense—and that was, unsurprisingly, Parthibendran. “I’ve been fortunate enough to enjoy the acquaintance of the Pazhuvoor queen for only a brief while, *Komagane*, but that short time was more than enough to convince me of her utter fealty to her husband; a very goddess amongst wives.” He stepped forward. “One word sullying her spotless reputation and I shall make whosoever said it a prey to my sword, I swear!”

“I’ve no need to even unsheathe my sword,” Kandamaaran, unwilling to seem loathe in his defence stepped forward. “One word against the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani and I shall strangle the scoundrel with my bare hands, I swear!”

“So will I,” Vandhiyathevan swore, coming to the fore in his turn. “One word dishonouring the young queen of Pazhuvoor and I shall burn the wrongdoer to cinders with just a look!”

“Ahaha, now calm down, my friends—you look like you’ll fall on me in a moment! Witness the zeal, the immense eagerness these youngsters show in honouring chaste, noble Thamizh womanhood, *Thaatha*. But hark: no one here has spoken a word against the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani—neither will I stand by while such disgraceful words are spoken. I shan’t wait until these brave warriors, these knights of honour come galloping up; I shall have hacked the one who spoke in moments. No, I merely drew attention to the fact that despicable rumours are flying around about her closed palanquin, and that the cowardly Madhuranthakan journeyed across town and the country within its confines in secret … and I ask you: wouldn’t it give rise to lewd comments and bawdy speech, should the young queen travel in the same manner as a grown man, the curtains of a palanquin sealing him from the public?”

“Your highness, why must Madhuranthakar, the grandson of Paranthaka Chakravarthy, the noble son of Kandaradhithar travel in a closed palanquin?” asked Parthibendra Pallavan. “I really don’t understand—”

“His reasons are hilarious as well: apparently he wanders the land in a bid to gather support …!”

“For what purpose, exactly?”

“What do you mean, *what purpose*? The ascension to the Chozha *samrajyam*’s throne once my father’s time is done, of course. A pretty tale, eh? Word is that he was even here, in this very

Kadambur palace in clandestine fashion some months ago, on the same errand! And that there was a midnight conspiracy meeting too … weren't you with me, Parthibendra, when the Thirukkovilur *kizhavanaar* related these incidents? He even mentioned that Madhuranthakan's eagerness to wear the crown might actually push him into driving my father to heaven sooner than usual … surely you remember all of it?"

"I do, your highness. I didn't believe any of it then and I find that I believe it even less, now. Especially after seeking an audience with your father in Thanjavur—"

"You? Neither did I—had I done so, I wouldn't have set foot in the Kadambur palace as a guest, would I?" Quite suddenly, Aditha Karikalan laughed to himself, as though he had recalled something.

Sambuvaraiyar cleared his throat at this juncture. "Your highness doubtless knows of the long existing feud between Thirukkovilur Malayaman's clan and ours …"

"Why not? Especially when even the bards of Sangam literature have sung paeans on it? Malayaman Thirumudikkaari killed Kollimalai's Valvil Ori and you, the latter's descendents have faithfully nurtured the hatred over generations …"

"Valvil Ori's death was avenged almost at once, *Komagane*. His kinsman, Athigaman Nedumaananji marched upon Thirukkovilur and destroyed it; Malayaman's Mullur hill fort was not spared either—it was razed to the ground …"

"Athigaman didn't wreak his vengeance all by himself, *Sambuvaraiyare*; he accomplished this onerous task with the aid of my ancestor Killi Valavan. But why rake up these ancient tales now?"

"Because Malayaman certainly seems eager to keep the hatred alive, even if we are intent on forgetting it. He finds an excuse to heap accusations on us at each and every turn—"

“I did mention, didn’t I, that the old man was getting long in the tooth? Obviously his wits have gone begging as well. In fact, I’m even a little concerned that he shouldn’t arrive on your doorstep with a massive army whilst I’m here, to protect me from peril—”

“My prince, if—if you should entertain the—the slightest suspicion on that score …” Sambuvaraiyar faltered.

“Suspicion? No; none at all. Our bond with Malayaman is merely two generations-old but the one with the Pazhuvettarayars has continued through six—why, the Pazhuvoor lord is here this very instant; what sort of a maniac would I be to suspect him of a conspiracy against the Chozhas?” And Aditha Karikalan cackled maniacally.

“I shall never ever act against the Chozha dynasty, your highness; I swear on my honour,” Pazhuvettarayar announced, majestically. “Neither shall I ever descend to any act that flies in the face of honour and justice; this I doubly swear!”

“Indeed there’re such things are honour and justice; I was hoping to indulge in a meaningful conversation with you where I could hope to learn more about these much-vaunted concepts. And we shall, during the hours spared from hunting and artistic pursuits.” Karikalan turned to his host. “Now, Sambuvaraiyar, where have you lodged me and my friends in this massive palace?”

“We’ve cleared out the whole of our guest quarters in the rear for your and the Pazhuvoor king’s exclusive use, *Ayya*; I shall accommodate the rest of the lords and chiefs with me, in the front—”

“Are more expected?”

“Certainly, your highness. Those from the surrounding regions are eager for an audience with you and many shall doubtless arrive.”

“Oh, let them come; let them come by all means. This shall be an opportunity to discuss and decide, once and for all, that which must

be resolved," announced Aditha Karikalan.

"Madhuranthakan's plots aside, I wish to engage in a conspiracy with you on my own account—and there cannot be a more fitting place for one than this!"

Chapter 17

Poonguzhali's Passion

Poonguzhali lounged in her little boat as it drifted along the canal from Nagapattinam, approaching Kodikkarai with every moment. Accompanying her was Sendhan Amudhan.

Golden blooms of *thazhampoo* unfurled their thick, lustrous petals, releasing a heady fragrance upon the banks.

An emerald-green parrot alighted upon one and the large flower swayed like a miniature swing with the weight; the bird echoed the movement, before bending towards the golden petal for a swift peck with its coral beak. The drifting craft seemed to herald an alarm, however and it suddenly fluttered away with a panicked shriek: *kikkee! Kikkee!*

"If it's ever your fate to be born, it has to be as a parrot," Poonguzhali murmured.

"So you say, but who knows its trials and tribulations?" Amudhan countered.

"No matter what the troubles, it can always fly about the endless skies as it pleases, can't it?" She demanded. "Surely there's nothing

more wonderful?”

“And yet, even such a free spirit can be imprisoned by some …”

“Indeed, yes; princesses in palaces—those cruel demons—shut up pretty parrots … and then caress and fondle them with love! If I were a *chedippen*, a servant in a royal household, I’d poison those caged birds—and those vicious *rajakumaris* who stuff them in cages—”

“Anyone hearing this would judge you a cruel demon too,” warned Amudhan.

“By all means. I’d rather be a *raatchasi* rather than a *rajakumari*!”

“But … why this intense hatred for them, Poonguzhali? Surely they’re deserving of pity too, in a way? Their destiny is to live bound by the chains of palace restrictions, after all, much like parrots in gilded cages. And even if they should, by some miracle, ever step out—witness the rules, regulations, security and secret measures? They couldn’t possibly just sprint through their front doors, leap into their boats and set sail in sea and stream all by their gloriously solitary selves like you do, could they? Nor roam about the forest at will like deer bounding across the landscape?”

“Who’s stopping them from leaping and sprinting as they please, for God’s sake? Not me, surely? Why don’t they wander about forest, plain, hill and dale?”

“It’s not just a question of will, but birth and way of life as well. You might wish to spread your wings like a parrot but that’s not possible, is it? The freedom you enjoy is only because of a birth and fairly unfettered childhood upon the seashore; hardly an option for gently bred royals. And here’s another unusual fact: parrots that have been incarcerated for a while and eaten out of the hands of princesses don’t wish to escape their cages even if they’re released; they flutter just a little distance, shriek *kreech! Kreech*! And then return to their

prisons! I've seen this myself, in the palaces of Thanjai and Pazhaiyarai—"

"Never, ever shall I submit to such an imprisonment; if I were a parrot, Amudha, I tell you that I shall bite the hand of the precious *rajakumari* who shuts me up in a cage and then deigns to feed me …"

"In other words, you wish to be neither a parrot in a gilded cage, nor a princess in a glorious palace—"

"No, not at all. I'd rather poison myself!"

"Excellently put. Which means that you oughtn't to cherish ambitions of wedding princes in palaces either."

Dark, glooming storm-clouds were clustering densely in the eastern skies. *Paleer—paleer*! flashed jagged tendrils of lightning; thunder rumbled low, somewhere in the distance.

Amudhan's last words sparked shards of brilliant lightning in Poonguzhali's beautiful, dark eyes too. "And who," she demanded wrathfully, "might have mentioned my desire to marry a prince, pray?"

"No one; I merely voiced my own thoughts," Amudhan's tone was tranquil. "If that's not your intention, well and good; forget I ever said anything."

For a while, silence reigned in the boat. Silence—except for the low splash of Sendhan Amudhan's oars cleaving the shallow waters; the dry, rasping croak of frogs along the banks; the screeches and shrieks of seabirds; the roar and crash of waves upon the distant shore, and the grumbling rumble of thunder in the east.

And then, Amudhan cleared his throat, preparing for a speech, gathering his courage while he was at it. "You mentioned that

Vandhiyathevan had revealed my heart, didn't you, Poonguzhali? I'd —I'd be grateful if you could let me know your own. There—I see Kodikkarai's lighthouse; there may not be another opportunity to speak alone. My mother has been in Thanjai by herself for days; it's time I left tomorrow."

"Surely there's no need for Vandhiyathevan to act your envoy? You've got a tongue, haven't you? Ask what you need yourself, why don't you?"

"Fair enough," Amudhan acquiesced. "Will you marry me?"

"Why do you want me to?"
"My heart brims with love for you alone—that's why."

"And is marriage the only option for hearts that brim with love?"

"Not exactly, but that's always been the custom—"

"What would I gain by marrying you, Amudha? What would you give me? The life of palace luxury I crave? The jewels, ornaments, elephants, horses and decorated palanquins and maids I desire?"

"No—but a life far, far above all that you mention: a life of peace and tranquility. Hark, Poonguzhali! My hut nestles in a beautiful little garden on the outskirts of Thanjai city. Only my mother and I live there now, but if you joined us—oh, your whole life will change! My mother will welcome you with open arms; care for you with endless affection. You and I will rise every morning and gather fragrant flowers bursting from every vine and tree around our home, and fashion them into wonderfully designed garlands. While I deliver them to the Thanjai Thalikulathar and Durga Parameswari shrines, you could bathe in the lotus pond and help my mother with household chores. As the sun sinks towards the west, all three of us shall water the flowering bushes from the pond nearby; I shall spend evenings teaching you sacred Thamizh *pathigams*, sweeter than nectar and you shall sing them in your gloriously beautiful voice; your

tongue shall taste the delights of divinity and so shall my ears. And if we should so wish, we could visit temples, worship the lord and sing in His presence, thus delighting devotees as well. Surely there couldn't be a more fulfilling, delightful and wondrous life upon earth, Poonguzhali? Do think, won't you?"

His cousin, listening to this romantic effusion, broke into peals of derisive laughter.

"You described the life you found delightful, Amudha—but do you have any idea about the kind of life *I* hunger for? Do you know my ambition, my passion? I yearn to wed the lord of the Gods, *Devendran* himself—I crave a journey with him upon his celestial mount, the *Airaavadham*, amidst the very abode of the clouds in the heavens—I burn with the desire to grab *Devendran*'s *Vajrayudham* from his very hands and launch it upon them—and when I do, jagged splinters of lightning shall erupt from the dark, roiling clouds, a thousand, ten thousand shards of them—and crush the heavens into a million pieces! Thunder usually strikes aimlessly upon the choppy seas or soulless forests, disappearing in smoke and ash—but I shan't waste such a heavenly weapon upon empty wastes, Amudha: I shall scour the earth for the pretty palaces of princes, princesses, kings and queens—and fling them upon brick and stone—I shall watch and delight as their beautiful mansions and sky-high towers crumble to dust, mingle with mud! And if *Devendran* should refuse me for some reason, to *Vayu Bhagavan* will I go; no matter his many wives; I shall beg him to marry me as well and then—oh, and then, Amudha, this world shall see nothing but the fury of thunderstorms, the wrath of whirlwinds and the anger of endless gales! *Sandamaruthams* shall uproot entire trees, their enormous branches and massive trunks falling upon and crushing palaces and mansions; storms and winds shall destroy ships and vessels into pieces—passengers shall tumble into the seething, churning sea, fighting for their lives! And if there should happen to be princes and *rajakumaris* amongst their number, I shall consign them to the bottom of the ocean, and save the rest … only if I please, of course, and as a favour. Should *Vayu* refuse me, I shall stomp towards *Agni*

Bhagavan and then, oh, must you even ask? The whole world shall explode into flame—”

“Stop, Poonguzhali, please—don’t! These are sour words of severe disappointment, a distress that is no echo of your true self. They don’t come from your heart. A mistake indeed to bring up the subject of marriage without divining your sentiments; pray, forgive me,” Amudhan sighed. “Only the great God can ease your pain and soothe your spirits; I shall pray day and night for His succour—”

Poonguzhali, seated all this while, stood abruptly and peered intently in the direction of a tree upon the banks. Amudhan followed her stare—and caught sight of a woman’s face amidst the branches. Recognizing in it the faint echo of his mother’s features, he gasped.
And then realization dawned: this could not possibly be her; it was likely the elderly lady his cousin said lived upon Boodha Theevu; his *periyamma*.

Poonguzhali, for her part, leapt upon the shore, and bounded on fleet feet towards the woman.

Chapter 18

The Arrow Strikes!

Poonguzhali stared at *Oomai Rani*, standing half-concealed by the trees on the banks of the stream, rather taken aback at having encountered her at such an unexpected place and time. Well aware of her aunt's loathing of outsiders, she wondered if the older woman would sprint at the presence of Sendhan Amudhan—and that very instant, her *athai* bounded away. Poonguzhali leapt off the boat the next instant and scrambled up the embankment, to catch sight of her vanishing into the dense forest at a little distance.

By this time, Amudhan had made it to land himself, climbing up the rise to reach her side. "Who on earth was standing here just now?" he panted.

"Couldn't you tell?"

"I wasn't quite sure. Perhaps—"

"My *athai*, yes—and the *periyamma* you believed to be dead."

"Of course! I thought I could detect my mother's features in her face —"

"None of that nonsense; there's no resemblance between my older and younger aunts—either in body or in character. How could there be, when one's a placid cow tied up in the shed and the other a fiery, independent lion-queen wandering at will in a jungle?"

"Have it your way, but why must the, er, lion-queen take to her heels at the very sight of you?"

"Not me, but you," Poonguzhali chuckled. "She's not very fond of strangers."

“But I’m hardly one.”

“*Athai* doesn’t know that, does she? She wouldn’t run if she did—but it does take a while before she can overcome her instinctive squeamishness.”

“Well, what now?”

“I’m going to find her, of course.”

“May I come with you?”

“Whatever for?”

“So I can make *Periyamma’s* acquaintance.”
“Why must you?”

“Too many reasons to count.” Having learnt a little of his recently undead relative’s history from Poonguzhali, Amudhan was eager to meet her in person—not to mention the fact that her affection, if he acquired it, might support his cause towards shifting his cousin’s romantic inclinations. “But must I really need one?”

Poonguzhali considered his request for a while, before assenting. “Fair enough. It isn’t going to be easy running her to earth with you in tow … but who cares? We’ll moor the boat right here.”

Accordingly, the boat was concealed underneath a sprawling *thazhampoo* bush, allowing them to strike across the landscape towards the forests of Kodikkarai.

“You said *Periyamma* lived on both Ilankai and Boodha Theevu, didn’t you?” Amudhan asked.

“I did, yes. Sometimes on one island; sometimes on the other.”

“Does she come here often?”

“Only rarely … especially if I haven’t visited her in a long while.”

“Does that mean that she’s here now on your account?”

“Not this time. There’s another reason behind her presence, I think.”

“And that is …?”

“Perhaps to discover the true fate of her adopted son? If he drowned in the raging ocean or survived the wretched gale? *Athai* does know that the whirlwind struck after the prince boarded the ship, after all.”

“Wait—Arul Varmar is her adopted son? But if that’s the case, who’s the biological one?”

“Now *that’s* a mystery I haven’t solved yet. Some day, I certainly intend to unravel all the knots and learn that secret.”

“I wonder if her real son is alive? Or dead?”

“He certainly could be dead,” Poonguzhali shrugged. “Who knows?” Silence reigned for a while, before she broke it. “You said *Athai’s* features reminded you of your mother’s, Amudha. Detect anyone else’s?”

“Some faint memory seemed to stir, but … nothing clear; it felt cloudy, as though shrouded by a veil—”

“Have you seen the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani often?”

“On occasion … why, yes; now that you mention it—Nandhini Devi’s face, to the life! Astonishing indeed … but how could it be? And how did *you* stumble upon this fantastic resemblance, Poonguzhali?”

“I’ve seen—and still see—*Athai* often enough, after all. And of course, I caught sight of the young queen a few days ago right here,

in Kodikkarai. The similarity of their features couldn't but leap to the eye …"

"How could it have been, do you think?"

"And that's another mystery I'll have to solve, some day. In fact, I'm planning on asking *Athai* today, once I meet her—"

"How though? What with her being mute …"

"Surely you speak with your mother, Amudha?"

"Yes, but only through gestures; a habit I acquired from birth. Even so, communicating anything new or unfamiliar is certainly tricky."

"*Periyathai* and I converse the same way. What we can't sign, we draw; simple pictures …"

"How dreadful that two sisters in the same family were born thus? And their poor parents—imagine their anguish!"

"That's not all, Amudha. Apparently they quarreled terribly as youngsters; that was why Grandfather escorted *Periyathai* to Boodha Theevu and made the island their home. He seemed to have lavished her with affection. An astrologer appears to have predicted her future as a queen—so it almost broke his heart when he realized that she was mute …"

Conversation eased their walk; they were within the forest before they knew it. Finding *Oomai Rani* was another enterprise altogether; they searched and hunted endlessly, to no avail.

"Amudha, *Athai* isn't to be found because of your presence," Poonguzhali said, finally. "She hides herself on purpose."

"My excellent fortune I suppose; nothing I plan ever materializes. Shall I leave?"

“How, though? I’ll have to be your guide out of this jungle.”
Abruptly, a voice assaulted them from within the dense foliage; an eerie, unnatural call that seemed to belong to neither man nor beast.

It sounded twice or thrice more; a few deer bounded in the direction.

Poonguzhali sank into thought for a few moments. “Amudha,” she whispered. “Follow me—but don’t make a sound.”

They tiptoed towards the bizarre cry … and stumbled upon an amazing tableau.

Oomai Rani leant negligently against the trunk of a tree, a few tender shoots and saplings in her outstretched hand. Seven or eight beautiful deer were ranged around her, jostling and pushing in an effort to reach for them. Meanwhile, a young, graceful fawn perched on one of her shoulders, staring at her face out of large, worshipful eyes.

Poonguzhali and Amudhan stood gazing at this rare, intimate scene, unwilling to move a muscle.

Characteristically, it was the fawn that first recognized the alien presence, raising its head to stare at them before bounding off its perch. The adults, now alerted as well, stood poised for flight, should the humans make a move.

The lady now glimpsed them. Another, extraordinary call erupted from her throat.

The deer heard it—and leapt away in one sure, swift bound.

“*Athai* is unfamiliar with the human tongue, but more than adept at that of animals,” Poonguzhali murmured, as she made a sign. Then,

she stepped closer to the older woman, who caught her in an embrace and pressed her lips to her forehead.

Sendhan Amudhan kept his distance, as aunt and niece communicated in the language of silence.

Then, Poonguzhali turned and gestured him to step forward. When he did, *Oomai Rani* settled her keen gaze upon him, eyes travelling up and down his form, before placing a hand upon his head for a few moments as though in blessing.

Then she pulled away, dragging Poonguzhali by the hand instead, leading them all to the banks of the stream. She sat down, and made a gesture to her niece to leave.

“Let’s go home, Amudha,” announced the younger woman. “*Athai* won’t accompany us; she wishes food to be brought here.”

The duo began to walk in the direction of the lighthouse.

“”And … what of your answer to me?” Amudhan asked, finally.
“Some intention of coming with you to Thanjai did exist; I won’t deny. But that’s not possible now. *Athai* wants to see her beloved adopted son, so another visit to Naagaippattinam lies in my future. You can’t exactly afford to stay by my side as she’d make a run for it—not to mention the fact that I shan’t be able to learn what I wish.”

“So much for my great fortunes,” He heaved a sorrowful sigh. “I may as well take my leave of you now—”

“No, not on earth. You’d better come home, have a meal and take leave of everyone, beginning from your uncle, or they’ll have my head!”

Trudging through the jungle, they stumbled upon another tableau amidst the dense bushes: a couple engaged in low conversation.

“Ah, *Anni* Raakkammal! It seems she still hasn’t given up her habit of indulging in secrets,” Poonguzhali muttered to herself. “I wonder who the newcomers are, this time? Perhaps the same Pandiya spies? Or someone else?”

As if on cue, Raakkammal emerged from within the bushes, caught sight of her sister-in-law and jumped a little, clearly startled. She gathered herself instantly, however, composed her features and strode swiftly towards them. “Where on earth have you been all this time, Poonguzhali?” She demanded. “Your father and brother were worried out of their wits—”

“Why, though? This is hardly the first time I’ve left home, is it?”

“The first time you’ve disappeared with your cousin in tow, though. What if you’d eloped without a word to anyone?”

“For God’s sake—*Anni,* how many times have I said that I detest stupid speeches of this sort? If you dare start again …”

“I won’t, my girl, I won’t, never fear. Who cares if you marry Amudhan, or an *arasakumaran*? Your *periyathai* was hereabouts, looking for you; have you seen her?”

“No, not yet,” Poonguzhali answered. Somewhere during the trudge home, she managed to snag a few moments for a word with her cousin. “Careful, Amudha; my sister-in-law is in cahoots with Pandiya spies. She might try to pick your brain as well—”

“Worry not; I shall remain mute for the rest of what little time I’m here,” he assured.

***

That afternoon saw Poonguzhali row once more towards Naagaippattinam, *Oomai Rani* accompanying her majestically in the boat.

Such times, spent in her aunt's company, were usually soothing as a balm to the younger woman. For two souls as alike as theirs, each the mirror of the other, moments like these afforded a peace and tranquility quite beyond the reach of mere mortals.

This time, however, Poonguzhali appeared to be denied such solace. Memories of a previous journey along the same route mere days ago, a fevered Ponniyin Selvar, unconscious and often delirious in her little craft, could not but intrude and the knowledge that she had put herself through considerable trouble merely to give a prince into the keeping of an indulged, privileged princess seemed to pierce her heart, releasing a sharp, bitter burst of pain.

Not to mention the pity that surged within, when she remembered the ruthlessness with which she'd almost pushed Amudhan from home: *Leave for Thanjai*!

But there was something else that occupied her thoughts aside from the above: her father Thyaga Vidanga Karaiyar's words of caution: "Some restraint in your activities would be welcome, Child. Strange new men, men I do not know, come and leave at all times: I know not why. The *rajyam* is riddled with conspiracies—but make sure that you are not implicated in any of them! Remember that our family owes eternal fealty to none but Chozha royals …"

The sage warning, coupled with her own sister-in-law's mysterious movements, served to trigger in Poonguzhali's heart a panic she had never known, thus far. Had those so-called strangers actually come in search of her? Hoping to discover Ponniyin Selvan's dwelling, perhaps? And if they *should* expose his hiding-place—all through her own callous disregard—good God, what an appalling failure that would be, an unforgivable crime …

As though to add to her private tribulations, the banks of the stream proposed their own brand of danger: the foliage just beyond, rustled eerily; odd noises disturbed their peace …

… but there was no breath of wind.

It was as though the eight directions of ancient fables and myths had conspired to stifle every whisper of a breeze.

Oomai Rani for her part was spared such debilitating concerns; mute and deaf into the bargain, she could hear nothing and therefore, could offer no reassurances or counsel on that score.

She did possess other gifts, however—wondrous, amazing skills that were far beyond mere hearing and sight; a sixth sense that superseded other, lesser faculties and warned her in time; surely no danger could threaten Poonguzhali over her superior knowledge?

But wait … even *she* was gazing often with ill-concealed worry at the banks towering on either side; was danger indeed following in their wake?
Her concerned glances were soon explained, however—an explanation that also managed to allay Poonguzhali's own alarms, in a way …

… for a group of deer, four or five of them, were peering through the scrubby bushes lining the banks, staring with unconcealed interest at the boat—no, at *Oomai Rani* herself, as it turned out.

Ah, truly, no creature on earth could ever hope to rival deer for sheer beauty, Poonguzhali mused. *And why the gracious God should also create men, is beyond me. Men—cruel, vicious men—chandaalars that hunted and killed even such delightful animals in their quest for blood—*

Lost in reverie at the beguiling deer and their unarguable charms, her arms ceased rowing, the boat drifting to a stop.

A bizarre, uncanny sound erupted from her aunt's throat; this one quite unlike her call that morning—but filled with fear and

unmistakable warning.

The animals took heed; abruptly, they bounded away in alarm.

Almost at the same instant, an arrow whirred through the air from some hidden vantage point, and struck a deer. It buckled with a pitiful moan.

Oomai Rani leapt out of the boat onto the banks, towards the injured creature.

The moment she approached it, however, the bushes around in all four directions rustled; men, seven or eight in all, some armed with spears, surrounded her. And at a little distance appeared the woman who had acted their guide: Raakkammal.

Poonguzhali's aunt tried to escape her captors; when she realized that her efforts would be in vain, however, she simply stopped, ceasing all resistance.

Two men approached and bound her arms with sturdy rope.

Everything had happened within a matter of moments, even as Poonguzhali stood watching from the boat, aghast and disbelieving. The moment she realized that strangers were imprisoning her aunt, however, she bounded to land from boat, screaming in anger, her oar raised to assault.

Five or six of the men around Mandhakini pounded towards this new threat, dragging her back towards the boat and trussing her up well and truly with more rope.

Then, they turned. Escorting *Oomai Rani*, who accompanied them placidly, they strode through the forest and vanished from sight in moments.

Hidden Meanings and Explanations

“So much for my great fortunes …”

The exact words Sendhan Amudhan uses when bemoaning Poonguzhali’s rejection are: “*Naan koduthu vaithathu avvalavudhaan …*” Roughly, this translates to “This is all I’ve saved, to enjoy.” Ancient Hindu beliefs centre upon the idea of every act of virtue or sin eventually adding up, to help or haunt us later in our lives. Accordingly, our virtues are a form of savings that come to our aid when we need them the most. Amudhan laments the fact that he obviously hasn’t done enough good and accumulated virtue, as he couldn’t secure Poonguzhali’s love.

“ …caught her in an embrace and pressed her lips to her forehead.”

Technically, Kalki describes *Oomai Rani*’s actions towards Poonguzhali thus: *“Katti anaithukkondu uchi mukarnthaal.”* This literally translates to embracing someone … and then smelling the top of their head. Before readers raise brows at this bizarre description, here’s what the action usually entails: kissing people in welcome—even near-relatives—is not usually done in South India, but there’s a close substitute: embracing the person, and pressing your cheeks or face to their head, combining a hug with a benediction. This was a practice usually followed by elders.

Chapter 19

Of Mirth—and Wrath

Ridding herself of the ropes that bound her to the boat—at breakneck speed, especially—was no easy task, as Poonguzhali swiftly found out. Those *chandaala* criminals! They hadn't even bothered to do a clean job of it, just tossing the ropes every which way, double and even triple-knotting them in the process. Her little

dagger lay at the bottom of the boat; if she could manage to get at least one hand free of the bonds cutting into her skin—but those scoundrels had bound the knotted ropes far too firmly at her back.

With incredible difficulty, Poonguzhali bent, managed to grip the knife's handle between her teeth—and began sawing off one end of the rope at that same, laborious angle. The strategy worked; the rope gave way just a little, loosening the tie. Once again, with Herculean effort, she freed one hand, after which releasing herself became much easier.

It still took her nothing less than almost a *naazhigai*, however, to ensure complete freedom.

Wait—was that the sound of footsteps upon the banks? And was that a shadow? One of the men who tied me up, presumably. Or, even more likely, a sentry posted to make sure I didn't untie myself and make an escape?

Well, I'll show them, she fairly growled to herself. *The moment he shows himself, this knife shall bury itself into him*! And she stood poised for the encounter, the dagger raised in readiness. But …

… oh, the disappointment!

"Poonguzhali?" came Sendhan Amudhan's enquiring voice. The next instant, his terrified face peeked from above the banks of the stream.

She returned her dagger to her waist by which time he too, had caught sight of her. "Good God, you're alive?" He shouted out loud before bounding forward.

"That annoys you, I suppose? You'd better just murder me yourself, then—not that you'd ever screw up the courage to do such a thing."

"Siva Siva, these horrendous words—why on earth would I want to kill you? You're the one butchering me with your tongue."

“Well, why couldn’t you have come just a few moments earlier? Did you even *think* of how difficult I found it to free myself—” She attempted to stand as she spoke, but the unruly ropes that still twined willy-nilly around her knees toppled her; she overbalanced and would have almost fallen, had Sendhan Amudhan not practically leapt forward with a horrified shriek and caught her in the nick of time.

“*Ayyayo*—did those wretched scoundrels actually leave you in this state? Your poor skin—scarred and bruised—”

“Such touching concern … why couldn’t you have come earlier?”

“There you go again. How on earth could I have guessed that you’d be put upon this way? You did practically take me by the scruff of my neck and pushed me to leave …”

“Why return, then? To cremate my corpse and make sure to perform the proper rites in case I was dead?”

“Good God, Poonguzhali. Siva Peruman might have retained deadly poison in his throat, but you’ve certainly stored plenty in your tongue. All I’ve done is come pelting to your aid once I heard from your sister-in-law that you might be in danger. And this is the thanks I get!”

His cousin had, in the meantime, leaped from boat to bank. “My dagger almost found its mark in you—but you made a lucky escape. Never mind; it won’t miss its next target. I shan’t rest until I’ve made sure my wretched *anni* is well and truly dead. Where’s that *chandaali*?”

“You’ve given me up and jumped on to your sister-in-law now, have you? Why visit your wrath on her, for heaven’s sake? To wreak your revenge for her having mentioned your fate?”

“To wring her neck for having betrayed my aunt. Didn’t we actually catch sight of her whispering secrets to someone amidst the shrubbery?”

“You’re wrong, Poonguzhali. I’ve no idea what kind of conversation she was indulging in with whom, but I’m sure she wasn’t the one to help capture your aunt. The rascals who took her also made sure to tie your *anni* securely to a tree and bludgeoned her head in the bargain. She’s got quite a painful bruise—”

“Well, here’s a pretty tale! I don’t believe a word of this nonsense, although you do; she’s certainly taken you in. Fair enough; tell me why you returned and where you saw her and … tell me everything!” Poonguzhali finished, breathless with anticipation.

Sendhan Amudhan duly obliged.

He had been plodding along the thoroughfare to Thanjavur, on his blameless way; not happily of course, never that, considering his late encounter with Poonguzhali and the knowledge of her true feelings. He missed her however, loathed leaving her and was musing over everything that had happened … when shouts and screams from the jungle nearby assaulted his ears, accompanied by the sound of hurried footfalls. Amudhan swiftly concealed himself behind a convenient tree—just in time to glimpse seven or eight men armed with hefty spears storm along the forest trail and onto the *rajapattai*. There seemed to be a female in their midst and to Amudhan, peering desperately through the foliage, a gap in the posse seemed to indicate that it was Poonguzhali’s aunt. *This really couldn’t be*, he shook his head. It was probably his overwrought brain playing tricks on him.

What puzzled him, though, were the distraught shrieks he kept hearing from the jungle long after the men had disappeared. His first instinct was to just leave. *What business is it of mine, anyway*? He mused uneasily. *Why not just go my own way? And yet … yet …*

His gentle heart could not but be moved by the heartrending howls. Perhaps he might just see whoever it was, and offer what help he could. His feet were moving of their own accord in the direction of the screams and before long, he saw a woman tied to a tree-trunk, her face liberally spattered with blood from her head: Raakkammal. Despite being absolutely petrified at the terrifying sight, Amudhan managed to gather his courage and approached her, his mind racing with questions even as he divested her of her bonds: *Who committed this dastardly act? Why? The men I just saw, storming out of the jungle? But—wasn't there a woman in their midst? Who was she?* He duly put these to Poonguzhali's sister-in-law, who replied in staccato bursts. Yes, it had indeed been Amudhan's *periyamma* with those men—she had tried desperately to stop the abduction—witness the price she had paid for her trouble!

"They thrashed me to within an inch of my life and bound me to a tree!" She lamented. "Your cousin and your *periyamma* were travelling by boat—in fact, that is where they dragged the old woman from—*ayyo*, what of Poonguzhali's fate? Go—go and look for her now!"

Alarmed beyond belief, Amudhan set off on a hunt at once, when …

"Just a moment, *Thambi*," Raakkammal stopped him. "You wouldn't happen to know where Poonguzhali and that mute demon were hurrying to, would you? And why leave you behind, pray? Where on earth were *you* off to, all by your lonesome self, anyway?"

Not only did Amudhan not relish the tone of the sharp questions, barely edging on civility, but the loathing that filled him when he heard Poonguzhali's aunt described as a *mute demon* went beyond description. Mumbling that he would "talk to her later," he practically took to his heels in the direction of the canal, heart thudding with the fear that Poonguzhali might have been badly hurt, even murdered, perhaps—a fear that evaporated only upon seeing her hale, whole and with nary a bruise.

“Well?” he demanded, at the end of his peroration. “Ready to admit that you were wrong to vent your fury on your *anni*?”

“It does seem like it, from what you say … where did you leave her? Let’s see where she is, shall we?”

“Where’s the guarantee that she will be where I left her?”

“If not, then somewhere nearabouts. At the very worst, she’ll try to rout us out … Amudha, she asked about our destination, didn’t she? *Athai*’s and mine?”

“Yes.”

“And you’re sure you didn’t give her an answer?”

“Indeed. The way she uttered the words “mute demon …” I couldn’t bring myself to even look at her for disgust.”

“Make sure you keep to that resolution even if she does unbend enough to ask you courteously. Why would she want to know where we were going? I’ve no doubt she has her reasons … we can’t dismiss any connection between her and my aunt’s abductors, Amudha. They may well have used her to gain information and beaten her up, once her usefulness was done. Even if that weren’t so, I’m sure she followed us with some spite in mind, some ill-intent. In any case, be warned about her intentions; don’t fall for her tricks and pretty speeches …”

“You mentioned that your elder brother had a habit of turning mute in his wife’s presence, didn’t you? Well, so will I. You can be the voice for both of us—”

Poonguzhali was surprised into a peal of laughter.

“Such sweetness … your laughter gladdens my heart like one of Thirunaavukkarasar’s divine hymns …”

“Let’s not get carried away, now. I shouldn’t have done that: I’m feeling far from merry. My heart seethes with fury; my soul burns with wrath—”

“And nothing soothes seething hearts more than the gentle calm of God’s grace,” assured Sendhan Amudhan.

Hidden Meanings and Explanations

“Siva Peruman might have retained deadly poison in his throat …”

Sendhan Amudhan is making reference to the mythological tale of Churning the Ocean of Milk, when Devas and Asuras fought for the ultimate elixir of life. Reportedly, several priceless objects appeared during the churning but so did Alahaala (or Halahala), a deadly poison which Siva Peruman swallowed to nullify its effects. Alarmed, his consort Parvathi Devi immediately clasped her hands around his throat to arrest its progress, upon which it turns blue. This is why He is often called Neelakantan, the Blue-Throated One.

Chapter 20

Presenting—Again—the Physician's Son

Poonguzhali and her cousin trudged along the forest path in complete silence.

"Amudha," she began after a while. "You and I seem to be bound by a bond that reaches across births," this, with a profound sigh.

"Who cares about previous births?" Amudhan scoffed. "Let me know if you have something good to say about this one."

“Don’t they say that a bond forged in a lifetime before will continue in the next too? Must be true, for when I left you at high noon, I believed I’d never set eyes on you again—yet there you were, in my presence within the next two *naazhigais* …”

“You needn’t let that worry you. Once we’re past this jungle track and onto the Thanjavur *rajapattai*, I shall go my way and so can you—”

“Well, I’ve no intention of leaving you to your own devices. Once I’ve managed to rout out and have a conversation with my *anni*, I plan on accompanying you to Thanjai, and make sure I find a way to succour my aunt’s distress; to right the wrongs done to her. I shall seek an audience with the Chozha emperor and submit my plea …”

“And you believe that it’s as easy as said, Poonguzhali? To even enter the Chakravarthy’s presence? When those of our ilk can’t even walk past the gates of Thanjai fort—”

“Why ever not, pray? If those gates won’t open for me, I shall splinter them into pieces; or vault over the towering *madhil* walls …”

“And what about the sentries guarding the entrance to the palace?”

“A full-blown screaming tantrum should do the trick, don’t you think? They’d be so alarmed I’d be carried into the audience chamber almost at once.”

“I’m not sure that would necessarily work on Chinna Pazhuvettarayar; he’s not easy to bully. Word around Thanjavur is that even Yaman would think twice before entering the city without his permission—in fact, that’s the reason the Chakravarthy is still alive, they say.”

“If meeting the Chakravarthy should prove impossible, then why not lay my case before the Pazhuvoor lords, pray? I shall badger them for retribution and if that doesn’t work, the Chief Minister Aniruddha Brahmaraayar, and if he won’t deliver justice, march I shall to all the

queens and royal mothers of Pazhaiyarai! I shan't rest a single moment, nor linger anywhere until I discover my aunt's fate; shan't sleep day or night until right is done by my poor *athai*. My beloved *anni* called her a mute demon, didn't she? Well, I shall transform myself into one as well and roam around cities and towns: "Justice—justice!" I shall scream as I wander across hill and dale … you'll be by my side, won't you, Amudha?"

"Certainly I will, Poonguzhali, on my honour—but why surrender to such a restless fate? Why must you torment yourself thus? You've gone too far as it is; mustn't we run your *athai* to earth first and save her? Oughtn't we to rescue her from her roguish captors? And inform your father and your brother of her fate—"

"My aunt is no ordinary woman, Amudha; she's been touched by divinity. No one can harm a hair on her head; should they even attempt it, she'd set them ablaze with just one fiery look, like Damayanthi burnt down a hunter. It's not so much her safety I'm worried about as outraged at such a dastardly act happening in broad daylight, in Chozha *samrajyam*! That's the wrong I seek desperately to right. They say that *dharmam* has ruled here ever since the time of Paranthaka Chakravarthy; that even a child could travel from one end of the kingdom to another, day or night, under Sundara Chozhar's benevolent rule … but how outrageous that in a country such as this, where they drum on endlessly about honour and unsullied reputations, wretched rogues should abduct an old woman—a naïve innocent who can neither speak nor hear, for God's sake!—in daylight! It's not even my *athai* I'm concerned about; what if what befell her today happened to be the fate of every maiden in the kingdom?"

"There's no denying that such a danger does exist these days here," Amudhan interjected. "The state of *dharmam* has certainly undergone a drastic reversal ever since Sundara Chozhar took to his bed. What on earth has happened to maintaining the basic tenets of safety, of chivalry; of guarding those in need? Young women, especially, are in screaming need of protection; who knows what

peril awaits them at every turn? It's essential they marry immediately and secure their safety."

"And if one did accept your hand," Poonguzhali broke into a peal of laughter. "Ever given a thought to how you'd protect her, Amudha? Ever wondered if you could take up a sword in her defence?"

"I learnt to string flowers into fragrant garlands and sing glorious *pathigams* in praise of the Supreme, Poonguzhali—not to pick up a weapon and go to war. But what of it? Didn't you teach me to ply oars in the sea? Wouldn't you be able to help me wield a sword as well? Surely that can't be too difficult? If Madhuranthaka Thevar can suddenly aspire to ascending the Chozha throne and understanding statecraft, why couldn't I comprehend the intricacies of weapons and learn warcraft?"

By now, they had reached where Poonguzhali's *anni* had been tied up—only to discover that the *maatharasi* had vanished. Amudhan's sharp eyes, however, had glimpsed something on the ground: drops of blood, likely from her head wound. He duly pointed them out to his cousin.
"It looks like they've delivered her a sound thrashing—obvious, I think, that she wasn't the spy who betrayed my aunt's whereabouts to her captors," Poonguzhali admitted. "On the other hand, that doesn't absolve her of all blame: we still have to discover what exactly she's been spying, and for whom."

"Now listen, my beloved uncle's daughter," Amudhan began, seriously. "Everything that's happened here so far has been a mind-numbing assortment of mysterious incidents—and every single one of them has had something to do with either the royals, or royal affairs. My question is: why on earth must you and I bother ourselves with such things? And put ourselves to an extraordinary amount of trouble?"

"Does it really matter if it's to do with royals, Amudha? Or even if it's as confounding a mystery as you say it is? How could I possibly

leave alone something that concerns my *athai* so nearly? Or you, your *periyamma*'s trials?"

"All I did was voice my worry, Poonguzhali. I did mention, didn't I, about catching sight of a woman in the midst of seven or eight men? And that I suspected her to be *periyamma*? To tell the truth, it didn't seem as though she were being constrained; she appeared to go with them of her own free will …"

"That may well have been, Amudha; in fact, I don't doubt it was. That's my aunt all over, you see. She may have actually wanted to know where she was being taken. If she'd been unwilling, she'd have made her escape from amidst a thousand captors. Not even the famed Chozha dungeons could hope to imprison her—which is why I mentioned that her plight didn't worry me. No; what I desperately want is to see justice served—justice for a crime, a horrendous crime committed not now, but twenty-five years ago! Until then," Poonguzhali finished. "I shan't know a moment's respite."

"Good God," he heaved a deep, heartfelt sigh. "What an impossibly complicated task have you set your heart on?"

The faint sound of voices reached them now: Raakkammal in conversation with …

… the Pazhaiyarai physician's son, Poonguzhali realized with loathing, her expression reflecting her distaste.

"Good heavens, my girl," the woman blurted out as she caught sight of her sister-in-law. "You've managed to survive, have you? I was terrified that they might have murdered you in cold blood … just look at me; look at this bleeding wound on my head—all the result of trying to save your blessed aunt!" She lamented. "I was asking the *vaidhyar*'s son here for some medicine—"

"Should the *karaiyar*'s daughter have suffered an injury …" he leered. "I wouldn't mind tending to that as well."

Poonguzhali ignored him. “*Anni*, which direction did my aunt’s abductors take? Do you know?”

“No, but the physician’s son claims that they went on the road to Thanjavur—”

“Well, my cousin and I intend to go after them,” Poonguzhali declared. “You’re free to inform my father. Come on, Amudha,” and she proceeded to stride away—when their informant stopped her.

“Wait a moment,” he intervened. “There’s no way you can follow them; they’ve taken horses that were tethered here just a while ago. But stay, they’re not the only ones; I have a stallion too—and I could ride at the speed of wind and mind to discover their destination, which I will reveal to you … in return for a favour, though—where were you and your *athai* bound for, in a boat? That’s all I need to know.”

“We don’t require his assistance, *Anni*. Just let *Appa* know our plans, will you?”

“Ah, the arrogance of a fisherman’s daughter!” Pinakapani, it seemed, could still not let things be. “You don’t require my assistance, do you? And such anger too—why, pray? Surely I wasn’t the one standing in the way of your wedding a prince? The Vaanar warrior you chose over me—the one you ferried in your boat—the one you tricked and betrayed me for—wasn’t he the one who pushed your precious princely love into the sea? Didn’t he kill your beloved? What’s point of raining your wrath upon me?” And he broke into contemptuous, ghoulish cackles.

Poonguzhali turned to level a stare at him, her eyes practically spitting sparks of fury. Abruptly, she grabbed hold of Sendhan Amudhan’s hand and dragged him off to the road. “The first head you chop once you’ve learnt your way around a sword,” she told him through gritted teeth. “… must be that physician’s wretched rascal’s!”

***

The cousinly duo travelled day and night without a pause towards Thanjavur, enquiring passersby often and anon about a posse of mounted soldiers escorting a woman. Information was forthcoming for at least half the way but then—nothing. They might as well travel all the way to the city in any case, they decided.

For Sendhan Amudhan, this was a journey of almost unalloyed happiness—because of Poonguzhali's entirely unexpected company, but also because of his enthusiastic lessons in sword-fighting. Having actually acquired a sword in Kodikkarai's vicinity at a forge well-known to Poonguzhali, he now had his cousin teach him techniques in holding it, wielding it, and various forms and stances.

Amudhan was not the only one deriving considerable pleasure from such a creditable enterprise; Poonguzhali realized that she was rather enjoying their unlooked-for expedition, herself.
Consequently, the towering fortress of Thanjavur was in their line of sight before she belatedly realized that a plan of action was desperately necessary to accomplish her mission—a realization Amudhan shared wholeheartedly. When even entering the fort was well-nigh impossible—a *bramma prayathanam*, a feat unfeasible even by creator Brahmmadevan's standards, as the saying went—how on earth were they to fulfill the veritable list of herculean tasks Poonguzhali had in mind?

Vandhiyathevan's fertile imagination and the fluidity with which he wove extraordinary schemes, ruses and plots now swam into Amudhan's mind. Why couldn't he possess even a tenth of his astuteness; his astonishing acumen? Or, better yet, why couldn't the Vaanar warrior just appear here, this very moment?

He sank into thought, reminiscing the days spent in Vandhiyathevan's company and wondering how he might have handled the situation …

… at which moment he glimpsed a closed palanquin upon the road.

The sun was swiftly sinking in the west, tendrils of darkness curling across the landscape with every moment.

The palanquin's screens were emblazoned with a palm tree.

"Ah, the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani's *pallakku*, it would seem," Amudhan mused to himself. "How convenient if I could meet her outside the fort and find my way to a signet ring?"

He duly confided this to Poonguzhali, who agreed that it seemed a sound plan … but how on earth were they to gain an audience with said Ilaiya Rani? Sentries guarded the palanquin after all, front and back.

"I wouldn't worry if I were you," she counselled. "Thanjavur is still half a *naazhigai* away; surely we'll bump into some sort of opportunity or the other before then?"

An opportunity did appear, then—entirely unexpected and unforeseen.

Hidden Meanings and Explanations

"… just like Damayanthi burnt down a hunter …"

Poonguzhali is speaking about Queen Damayanthi here, wife of the legendary King Nala of the Nishadha kingdom in ancient times. The fable details the fame and fortunes of this celebrated ruler who is deprived of not just his kingdom but the very clothes on his back, in a battle against Kali, who swears vengeance on the queen who rejected him and the king who wed her. Accordingly, Nala and Damayanthi are forced to leave their kingdom and wander around the jungle, where he abandons his consort. Bewildered and lonely

Damayanthi is preyed upon by a hunter, but due to the grace of a boon given by Lord Indra, she burns him to death. Their story continues as its own superbly crafted tale in one of India’s most enduring epics, The Mahabharatham.

Chapter 21

The Dubious Distinction of Ascending Palanquins

The monsoon that year had not quite been on time.

Twice the rains had seemed about to begin—only for the skies to clear as though for nothing.

The landscape began to reflect the arid state of affairs: Kaveri and her sisters were markedly slimmer, the flow of water steadily decreasing. Field upon field of newly planted saplings began to wilt under the scorching sun, deprived of nourishment.

“All the consequences of that wretched comet,” muttered an irate population. “The country seems to be damned to hell; royal affairs are in a state of constant confusion; there’s next to no news of the prince—and now it looks like the heavens have betrayed us as well …” These and more were the sort of comments that fell on a regular basis upon Poonguzhali and Sendhan Amudhan’s ears along their way.

Not that the lack of rain was an impediment; for them, the dry and dusty thoroughfare was certainly a convenience.

The sun had been broiling the earth all morning; the sweltering humidity all afternoon excruciating; perspiration poured off their

bodies even under the relatively cool shade of the trees lining the *rajapattai*.

“It doesn’t even seem like the month of *Aippasi*, does it?” they remarked, as they trudged along. “More like the blazing summer of *Vaikasi* …”

***

A little after the Pazhuvettarayar palanquin had passed them, a chilly breeze suddenly sprung up.

Salasala—salasala … rustled leaves on the trees alongside the road.

The skies seemed to darken in the northeast.

Gloomy storm-clouds appeared as though out of nowhere, upon the horizon. Within moments they raced into the sky, pushing and jostling for space, leaping and bounding onward and upward like a herd of elephants run mad.

The breeze suddenly transformed into a sharp, cutting wind; drops of rain sang through the draft, searing skin.

A gentle drizzle began, swelling within a quarter of a *naazhigai* into a thunderous downpour that swamped the ground.

Impossible to describe the pandemonium wrought by wind and rain amongst the windswept trees; branches began to splinter and crash to the ground while nesting birds, terrified out of their wits by the sudden destruction of their homes fluttered into all four directions with shrieks and screeches …

… only to be followed within a matter of moments by wayfarers as well. Some flew from the rain while others ran to escape a gruesome death from falling boughs.

Still others took to their heels at the terrifying, thunderous roar of the heavens erupting, as though the very cosmos had exploded.

Barely a while into the blinding rain and the day was almost ended, blackness descending upon the landscape.

Sendhan Amudhan and Poonguzhali had to give up the idea of entering the Thanjavur fort that very night. Instead, they would repair to his little garden abode; that would have to suffice. They walked along gingerly, minding their steps in the driving rain and darkness.

“I’m surprised, if you must know,” Amudhan remarked, once. “You, who’ve sailed though gales and whirlwinds in the middle of the sea—who’ve battled waves the size of mountains in choppy oceans—are terrified of a downpour?”

“All the storms and cyclones on the high seas and oceans won’t bludgeon your head with a branch, will they?” she retorted. “Thunder and lightning perhaps, but not a monstrous tree!”

She had barely finished the words when … *sadasada—sadasada*! A deafening crash assaulted their ears: said tree splintering to the ground just ahead of them.

Amudhan grabbed hold of Poonguzhali’s hand hard, preventing her from taking a step forward. “There’s no point in pressing on right now,” he advised. “There are several *mandapams* by the roadside around here, I know; we could take shelter in one of them until this deluge stops, and then continue.”

“Fair enough,” Poonguzhali assented. “But how on earth are we ever to find one in this pitch darkness?”

“The lightning is our cue. Keep your eyes peeled on both sides when there’s a flash—that’s our only option.”

As though the heavens had been listening, a brilliant shard of lightning bathed both earth and sky in radiant gold, almost blinding them.

“There—there’s one!” He called out.

She glimpsed it too—not just the *mandapam* but the massive tree that had fallen just a little away from it—and what seemed like a gaggle of men caught under it. “Amudha, did you see? Underneath —”

“I did,” He snapped. “We’d better get to shelter before the same fate befalls us as well!” He grabbed hold of her hand again and proceeded to practically drag her towards the structure he had seen.

They were within the *mandapam* in a matter of moments, squeezing out sodden clothes as much as they could, Poonguzhali attempting the same with her long, lank and dripping tresses. So water-logged was everything that the drops trickled down and ran all over the floor in miniature rivulets.

“*Adada*, we’ve drenched the *mandapam*,” she mourned.

“No loss as it isn’t about to suffer a cold or fever—but you’re absolutely soaked to the skin,” Amudhan lamented.

“I was practically birthed and raised by the ocean, Amudha. Surely you know that my other name is *Samudhra Kumari*? A few drops of rain are hardly going to harm me.” Even as she answered, her mind flew from a gloomy *mandapam* abutting the thoroughfare in close proximity of Thanjavur fort, to the Choodamani Viharam in Naagaippattinam. For, wasn’t the one who had fashioned her novel name in the monastery that very moment?

“My little hut and garden are quite close by, Poonguzhali,” Amudhan’s words reached her in a garbled mess, as though from far

away. “We’ll leave once this downpour ends; my mother is sure to take care of you.”

***

Again, a blinding flash of lightning.

The scene that had caught their attention first now resolved into a clear tableau—and startled both almost out of their skins.

An enormous banyan tree almost directly opposite the *mandapam* lay practically upended, roots in the air, sprawling branches and aerial shoots broken, smashed and mauled pitifully beyond repair.

Underneath the wreckage—were trapped two horses and five or six men.
There was also a posse of rescuers surrounding the tree, trying with all speed to pull away the unruly branches and shoots in a desperate bid to free the strugglers.

Mingling with their sighs and groans and the steady murmur of the rain were the shouts and moans of the fallen: “*Ayyo*!”—“*Appa*!”—“Here!”—“There!”—“Quickly!”

As intriguing as these sights and sounds were, something else soon arrested the attention of Sendhan Amudhan and Poonguzhali completely: a palanquin resting on the ground just a little away from the uprooted tree. All but two men, who stood by its side, were involved tooth and nail in extricating those caught by the branches.

“Saw the *pallakku*, Amudha?” Poonguzhali murmured.

“How could I not? Seems to belong to the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani.”

“Now why couldn’t that blasted tree have crashed onto it, I ask you?”

“Good God, Poonguzhali—why would you even say such a thing? Didn’t you mention a while ago that you wished to get something done through that very woman?”

“True. Doesn’t change the fact, though, that I loathe her just a little.”

“And your loathing ought to result in her being bludgeoned by a banyan tree?”

“Why not? Surely such a fate isn’t reserved for just commoners, but queens as well? Be that as it may, what about our scheme? Ought we to approach her palanquin and engage in conversation? Ask her aid in entering the fort?”

“Here’s a pretty tale! A fantastic moment to seek an audience with a *rani*, not to mention beg favours … we’re likely to be mistaken for thieves if we even step up to the palanquin and get thrashed into the bargain.”

“Our mission shouldn’t be a problem once I set eyes on her.”

“Indeed? How so?”

“A simple mention of my *anni*’s name. That, or a gentle word that I happen to be *mandhiravadhi* Ravidasan’s envoy …”

“Not a bad plan, as long as you’re actually able to approach her—look over there!”

***

A flash of lightning again, and this time the scene changed: two men were seen lifting the palanquin. Aha, were they truly off? Wait, no—certainly not—why, it almost seemed as though they were marching up to the *mandapam*, of all places!
Indeed, the palanquin was at the entrance within moments; the bearers set it down.

“It certainly looks as though the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani is desperate to run into us,” Poonguzhali quipped.

Amudhan gripped her hand and attempted to drag her into the depths of the *mandapam*—only to fail utterly in the face of her stubborn resistance.

“Who’s there?” Suddenly snapped an authoritative voice.

“We’re just wayfarers *Annae*, seeking shelter from the downpour just like you,” Poonguzhali called out in a sufficiently reassuring voice, aware that the question rose from one of the palanquin-bearers.

“All right, then—but not a step towards the *pallakku*, mind!”

“Why on earth would we?” she enquired. “Surely even climbing into one is a great good fortune?”

“Poet Valluvar has mentioned something of this too,” Amudhan cleared his throat as though beginning a peroration. “When he speaks of experiencing the consequences of deeds in a previous birth—”

“Enough, that will do! Kindly keep your mouths shut—by the way, how many are you?”

“Just two, but this *mandapam* is vast enough to accommodate two hundred, if necessary,” Amudhan remarked.

He spoke the truth as he knew it—entirely unaware that at that very moment, behind another of the edifice’s columns stood concealed a third man.

“Didn’t I suggest ages ago that we ought to take shelter the moment it began to rain?” protested one of the bearers to his colleague. “Not a soul listened—now look at the mess we’re in!”

“Who on earth could have predicted this, pray? I was confident that we’d be within the fort before the deluge soaked us—thank God for small mercies at least, that the tree didn’t choose the palanquin for its victim.”

Another flash of brilliant lightning.

The eyes and attention of Amudhan and Poonguzhali had remained fixed on the *pallakku* …

… which is why the sight of a woman gently pushing aside the screen and staring intently in their direction, riveted them. That, and the fact that said woman seemed to have clearly recognized them, judging by the smile that edged her lips.
Darkness cloaked the *mandapam* and its environs the moment the blinding flash passed.

“Amudha,” Poonguzhali spoke in muted tones. “You saw that, didn’t you?”

“I did, yes.”

“Who was in the palanquin, do you think?”

“The Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani, surely?”

“What was your impression?”

“It did seem like her—but I also felt a bit doubtful, to be honest.”

“There’s no question of doubt, Amudha; it’s absolutely certain.”

“What is?”

“That the woman in the palanquin isn’t the young queen of Pazhuvoor but my demented queen of an *athai*!”

“Hush—not so loud!”

“How else are we to accomplish our mission, pray?”

“What mission, pray?”

“The one that we trudged all the way here for, of course. We’ve finally run my aunt to earth; oughtn’t we to arrange her rescue?”

“Not possible at the moment. We’d better discover the palanquin’s destination right now, before we come up with a plan of escape.”

“Release the reins and catch hold of the tail, you mean. How pointless to waste this opportunity! No, we’re freeing *athai* right now; you can stay right here if you’re that petrified.”

“You seem to have forgotten the fact that she’s here of her own volition, travelling in that palanquin as though to the manner born—would she even wish to be rescued? And what about finding out where she’s bound; who set these abductors on her—”

“Perhaps to the dungeons? What could we possibly do in that case?”

“What couldn’t we? You forget that I’m lately escaped from said dungeons—and I’m not without some clout in royal palaces myself. Rescuing your blessed aunt from her captors is my responsibility. Leave me to it—and leave things be!”
Just as Poonguzhali came to the reluctant conclusion to take his wise counsel, something happened—something completely unexpected.

The palanquin’s screen seemed to widen more than usual, and a figure stepped out from within. It tiptoed upon the floor gingerly, like a feline stalking prey on padded paws, and was by their side in moments. The sentries at the entrance had noticed nothing, all of this having happened in pitch darkness.

Poonguzhali, however, had had no difficulty in recognizing the palanquin's erstwhile occupant as her aunt, *Oomai Rani*. The latter, though, grabbed their hands and dragged both towards the rear of the *mandapam*. She wrapped her arms around her niece, pressed her lips to her forehead and expressed her delight at having met her.

A conversation of sorts in sign language began between them; what a miracle indeed, that they were able to discern each other's features in that inky blackness, let alone exchange news?

At the end of it, Poonguzhali turned to Amudhan. "She wants me to get into the palanquin, and you to escort her to your home."

"What of your own sentiments?"

"To follow her instructions, of course. An excellent ruse, an *ubaayam* to discover the identity of her captors, isn't it?"

"Careful, now. Think a moment, won't you? *Ubaayam* it might be, but what of the *abaayam* involved? The risks that might follow?"

"Don't worry, Amudha. Not a hair on my head will be harmed by following *Athai*'s strategy but if it is—well, there's always my trusty knife at my waist," she declared.

Then, she hugged her aunt hard, emulated her by creeping towards the palanquin on noiseless feet, climbed in—and drew the silken drapes closed.

Chapter 22

Aniruddhar's Disappointment!

The capital had been Mudhanmandhiri Aniruddha Brahmaraayar's residence for the past few days, which meant that a succession of government officials; lords and chiefs of the realm; army generals; foreign ambassadors; representatives of various mercantile guilds; temple officials and scholars of not just Thamizh but Vadamozhi trooped in and out of his home, seeking his exalted audience; the entrance to his mansion was thus thronging with a heaving crowd on an almost permanent basis.

The chief minister possessed no regiment or battalion for his personal security; his retinue was a rather skeleton force as well—which meant that of reasons for distempered freaks with the Pazhuvettarayars, there were none.

And yet, the younger of the Pazhuvoor brothers still found an opportunity to mutter and murmur in discontent: safety and security had grown lax ever since the Mudhanmandhiri had made Thanjavur his abode; there was simply no telling the credentials of the hordes braving the fort-guards claiming to have an appointment with Aniruddhar and since his dwelling happened to be right next to the royal palace—where the Chakravarthy was currently in residence—the palace complex was overflowing with visitors. The numbers parading around the environs, insisting upon an audience with the Chief Minister and displaying his insignia to boot, beggared belief.

Chinna Pazhuvettarayar longed with all his stalwart heart to confront Aniruddhar about these issues, but rather lacked the courage to do so in person. Had the Elder been present, now —! The two of them could have cooked up some scheme but what with him inconveniently stationed at Kadambur, he felt not as though he had lost a brother, but a whole limb.

As though endangering the defense of not just the palace but the entire fort with his constant barrage of bantering visitors was not enough, Aniruddhar had also taken to issuing a great many discreet

commands—all under the courteous guise of asking favours, of course.

Only a few days ago, he had requested a posse of soldiers for Kodikkarai and Chinna Pazhuvettarayar had duly obliged. Again yesterday, he had begged for a palanquin—specifically one emblazoned with the Pazhuvoor crest, to escort a lady highborn from Thiruvaiyaaru—along with accompanying bearers, and the chief of the Thanjai fort had acceded to this as well. Not that this had not set off a train of rather unwelcome suppositions in his mind. *The wily Brammaraayan is up to his usual tricks*, he mused. *Who on earth could be this pedigreed person he is transporting in a closed palanquin, and why? I must and shall find out—but oh, for my elder brother's presence in these complicated circumstances*, he bewailed to himself.

Chinna Pazhuvettarayar was not the only one eager to know the identity of Aniruddhar's private, privileged guest; there was someone else suffering agonies of suspense: the Mudhanmandhiri's devoted disciple, Azhwarkkadiyaan.

The morning after the monstrous downpour, Aniruddhar had completed his slew of morning ablutions, rituals; broken fasts and arrived at the front of his mansion. Aware that a multitude had gathered to seek an audience, he sent a menial to list out potential petitioners—but when he learnt that one among them was Azhwarkkadiyaan, he sent for his disciple that very instant.

The Vaishnavite hastened into his guru's presence with alacrity, and presented himself with every sign of extreme deference and devotion, tinged with well-tempered nervousness.

"Well, Thirumalai?" enquired the Mudhanmandhiri. "What of your mission?"

"I submit my regrets, great Guru—for it was a failure."

“Not entirely unexpected, I admit. So, you could not gain even an audience with Aditha Karikalar?”

“I did, *Ayya*, and even communicated every one of your messages—to no avail. I’m afraid I couldn’t keep the prince from entering the Kadambur palace …”

“In other words, that is the prince’s current residence?”

“Indeed, *Swami*; I left only after having played witness to his highness’s right royal entrance into the palace, splendidly orchestrated by Sambuvaraiyar. As to the welcome offered by the local populace, words cannot do justice to their enthusiasm.”

“Again, not unexpected. And so—who else honoured the Kadambur palace with their exalted presence?”

“Parthibendran and Vandhiyathevan accompanied the prince, while Periya Pazhuvettarayar arrived in company of the Ilaiya Rani. Word is that several lords and chiefs from the midlands and Thirumunaippaadi have also been invited.”

“And Thirukkovilur Malayaman?”

“Played the prince’s escort as far as the Manimutha River—and then turned back.”

“Not to take his ease, I know; that wily old warrior is probably gathering forces even as we speak. I hear that Kodumbalur Periya Velaan is already marching towards us, having amassed a massive force in the south … heavens, Chozha Nadu’s fate truly rests upon the knees of the Gods, now. Surely you gleaned something of public sentiment on your way here, Thirumalai? Anything of note?”
“Mostly about the devastating disaster that befell the young Ilango. There’s a great deal of anger towards the Pazhuvettarayars …” Azhwarkkadiyaan paused. “Some have even taken to blaming you —”

“Not entirely unjustified, in my opinion. Thirumalai, I have lately formed the intention of resigning my post …”

“A decision that would result in my freedom as well, *Swami*; I shall spend my days in glorious pilgrimage around the country, sweetening hearts and ears with divine Azhwar *pasurams* … when do you plan on fulfilling this momentous resolution, if you please?”

“Once I have launched a last, desperate attempt at saving this *rajyam* from horrifying ruin. And then, I am done.”

“What sort of an attempt would that be, Guru?”

“An attempt in which I have taken the first, foremost and most impactful step. Ah, Thirumalai, it would appear that I succeeded where you failed …”

“Hardly surprising, that. Again, what task would that have been, pray?”

“I mentioned, did I not, that I had arranged to hunt and capture a certain mute woman wandering like a lunatic in Eezham? A task at which even you had to admit defeat?” Aniruddhar demanded.

“Indeed, yes, *Ayya*. Said mute woman—”

“Has been brought to our palace as of last night.”

“Aha, wonder of wonders, to tell the truth. And—how on earth did you accomplish this well-nigh impossible mission?”

“I fully anticipated her arrival in Kodikkarai to discover the young prince’s fate; whether he had survived the gale or not, you understand—and had appointed men to seize her if she did appear. Fortunately, she submitted to her fate without too many tantrums; she is here now. And while you are at it, do listen to this choice tidbit:

I had her escorted in a closed palanquin—and arranged to have the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani's own *pallakku* do the honours …"

"But—wasn't there a phenomenal storm and downpour last evening?"

"An unexpected weather anomaly that almost had me anxious for a while I admit, especially as there seems to have been an interruption along the way. Thankfully, however, the palanquin arrived safe at midnight last night—only after which could I rest easy."

"So late an hour—and did you stay up until then to welcome her?"

"Stayed up, certainly, but hardly provided for a welcoming committee; the ladies of my household were deputed on my behalf. There were some moments of concern, you see, on account of her untrammeled temperament; who knew what sort of an unprincipled fit she might pitch? I was grateful, though, that she seemed disinclined to make an exhibition of herself but merely made a good meal and took to her bed. If you must know, Thirumalai …" the Chief Minister allowed himself an uncharacteristic pause. "I must admit to some nervousness even now, at the prospect of meeting her face to face. A blessing that you arrived just in time …"

"A blessing, yes, for I'm eager to meet her too."

"Then let us tarry no longer, and repair to the *anthappuram* at once. She is acquainted with you in any case, isn't she? And knows you to be a friend of the young prince; she might look upon you more amiably than the rest of us."

Guru and disciple hastened towards the rear of Aniruddhar's palace where existed the residential quarters; the chief minister bid the maids to bring forth the woman who had arrived the night before. They did and stood her in front of Aniruddhar …

… who stared at her, stunned, his jaw not dropping only by sheer force of will.

Azhwarkkadiyaan's demure expression, however, was rather belied by the smile that edged his lips.

Hidden Meanings and Explanations

" … Aniruddhar had completed his slew of morning ablutions, rituals and broken fasts …"

The words Kalki uses to describe the Chief Minister's actions are: "*Snana-baanam*; *jaba-thabam*, *poojai-punaskaaram* …" – a series of beautiful, almost lyrical phrases that convey a wealth of meaning while packing an entire lifestyle within a few words.

Vadamozhi

Literally, the *Language of the North*, and refers to Sanskrit.

Chapter 23

Could a mute speak?

Aniruddhar leveled a severe stare at Poonguzhali for a few moments, before gesturing towards her escorts, the two women, the

thaathis, and interrogating them in a low murmur. Upon their reply, he bid them leave the chamber. Then, he turned to his disciple.

“Thirumalai,” he said slowly. “There would appear to have been some kind of mistake.”

“So it would seem, *Ayya*.”

“This … is a woman of few years. Not more than twenty, perhaps.”

“Not even those, I should say.”

“The *maatharasi* I expected to see boasted more than forty.”

“More, perhaps.”

“Indeed, your judgment is likely to be accurate; you were acquainted with Mandhakini Devi in Ilankai, weren’t you?”

“Yes; I tried to bring her here too, in accordance with your command —to no avail.”

“But this woman—she isn’t Mandhakini, is she?”

“No, *Gurudevare*, certainly and absolutely not.”

“Well, who could she be, then? And how on earth did she end up here?”

“Why not question the lady in question?” Azhwarkkadiyaan riposted.

“How does one question a mute, pray?”

“As to the fact that she *is*, in fact, so—”

“One of the first things I enquired of the maids; they affirm that she has spoken not a word since arrival.”

“If I may ask, *Gurudevare* … the agent you sent to identify and abduct her: who was he?”

“Good God—has that nincompoop blundered, then?”

“Which, er, nincompoop would that be, *Swami*? Not that I was aware that you were in the habit of dispatching such on sensitive missions …”

“He certainly seemed to have his wits about him. Remember the youngster who brawled with Vandhiyathevan during my visit to Pazhaiyarai?”

“Why … the physician’s son? Pinakapani?”

“Him indeed. I bid him released from prison and into my presence once I sent you and Vallavarayan to Karikalar—and concluded that he might suit my spy network. Which is why I dispatched him to Kodikkarai; he appears to have had some experience travelling along that part of the coast.”

“In other words, he was the one who brought this young woman here?”

“I did make sure to offer as perfect a description as I could … and he sent word swearing that the mission was a success, having escorted her as far as Thiruvaiyaaru.”

“And where’s he now, *Ayya*—this phenomenally skilled spy who succeeded where I failed? Surely it would be best to get him to confirm this young woman’s identity?”

“It would indeed … except for an unexpected accident that befell him last night.”

“*Adada*! What sort of an, er, accident and how?”

“He was at the rear of the palanquin cavalcade. In accordance with my instructions to enter the fort under cover of darkness, they had started from Thiruvaiyaaru at dusk, and were in the vicinity of the city in the early hours of the night. And then—well, you must know, of course, of the severity of the sudden storm …”

“Indeed, yes; I myself was forced to shelter in one of the numerous *yathirai mandapams* meant for travellers, to wait out the rage and fury.”

“The palanquin was almost at the fortress gates when, at a little distance, the storm upended a large tree nearly by its roots. Great good fortune that it missed the palanquin and crashed, instead, on those behind—and Pinakapani was one of those pinned underneath.”

“Just a tree upon that dastardly *chandaalan*’s head?” exploded a furious female voice almost simultaneously. “Why couldn’t it have been a shard of deadly lightning instead?”

The expression on Mudhanmandhiri Aniruddhar’s face, as he turned towards Poonguzhali, reflected his boundless incredulity. “Thirumalai,” he commented *sotto voce*, to his disciple, even as he continued to stare at her. “Was it this woman who spoke just now?”

“Certainly seemed so, *Ayya*.”

“How absolutely miraculous,” he murmured. “Can the deaf hear? And could a mute possibly speak?”

“Miraculous indeed that such marvels should occur, but hardly impossible considering thy gracious presence, a true devotee of the omniscient and omnipresent, all-surpassing Vishnumurthy? As the Azhwars superbly quoth—”

“Cease and desist from disturbing their holinesses under the circumstances, I pray you. This is no intervention of Vishnu Bhagavan but an inconvenient mistake somehow, somewhere. The young woman, I believe, has managed to pull the wool over our eyes —but why? And who is she? Why the deaf and dumb act all this while?”

“We could just ask her, *Gurudevare*.”

“And judging by your smirk, *Appane*, I wonder if you know more of the truth than I suspect. Fair enough; one may as well interrogate the cause of confusion: are you not deaf, Woman? Can you hear the words I speak?”

“I’ve sometimes wished that I were completely lacking in hearing, *Ayya*, but I’m glad now that I’m not—for the blessed news of a tree crashing upon that *chandaalan* of a physician’s son fell upon my ears, didn’t it?” Poonguzhali exulted. “And is he finally dead and gone, *Swami*?”

“Ah, your auditory skills are nothing short of perfect,” observed Aniruddhar. “Your speech is lucid as well; clearly, you are no mute.”

“Certainly not,” Azhwarkkadiyaan chimed in.

“Aha—glory to thy gracious and intellectual self for having discovered that I can, in fact, speak; reports about Mudhanmandhiri Aniruddhar’s extraordinary intelligence being unequalled in the entirety of the Chozha *samrajyam* are certainly not exaggerated,” Poonguzhali’s tone was sarcastic.

“Careful now, my girl; you dare mock me, do you? If you are no mute, why did you preserve your silence ever since you arrived last night? Why the pretence?” Aniruddha Brahmaraayar demanded. “The truth, now!”

“Naturally, I aim to please; until I came to this palace, *Ayya*, I was perfectly capable of excellent speech—there were even those who bestowed upon me the nickname of blabbermouth; a nonstop *vaayaadi* … but the right royal welcome I received and splendidly magnificent hospitality I encountered upon stepping foot in this marvelously magical palace rendered me dumb, mute and speechless for all intents and purposes. The ladies here communicated through gestures; I assumed them all to be mute and responded in kind. It was only after you spoke that I remembered the faculty of speech, to tell the truth.”

“And proven beyond all doubt that you are indeed, an insufferable *vaayaadi*. How in heaven’s name did the physician’s son bundle you into a palanquin here? I am all astonishment! A man of incredible cunning, even if lacking in perspicacity.”

“That spawn of sinners didn’t make the slightest effort to bundle me anywhere *Swami*; had he actually attempted such a thing, he’d have been on a celestial journey to Yamalokham by now.” Poonguzhali slipped out and held aloft the dagger at her waist.

“Good God, Woman, put that knife away, I beg of you. Why this wrath upon his hapless head, pray? You did admit, just now, that he had no hand in your abduction—”

“Perhaps not, but his men bound me with ropes and threw me into a boat, and tied up my *anni* to a tree, of all things—and then, he had the unmitigated gall to insist that he’d had nothing whatsoever to do with either incident …”

“Smart enough, as far as that goes; at least he retained wits enough to obey my instructions …”

“*Ayya*, much-vaunted chief minister Aniruddhar … were you indeed the one who dispatched that *thoorthan*, that scoundrel? And was it also you who ordered the capture of my poor, innocent mute *athai*?”

“Wait—your *what*? Mandhakini, the *karaiyar’s* daughter your aunt? If that be the case …” Aniruddhar paused. “What are you to Thyaga Vidangar, the lighthouse-keeper?”

“His beloved daughter, *Ayya*.”

“Surprising indeed, that I was unaware of Thyaga Vidangar possessing such a jabber-jawed girl as you.”

“I wouldn’t betray this admission in public, *Swami*.”

“You wouldn’t? Why not, my girl?”

“Word across the length and breadth of the entire kingdom is that nothing escapes your eagle eye; that there’s no incident, no event or news that is unknown to the fabled Mudhanmandhiri of Chozha *samrajyam*. Imagine your fall from grace amongst Chozha citizens if they even suspected your blatant ignorance?”

“Hardly a matter that costs me sleep, Woman—but in another matter of which I still remain in the dark, you must and shall help,” Aniruddhar shot the questions in quick succession. “You did mention that your aunt was abducted, didn’t you? Where is she now? And how did you climb into the palanquin I sent? Where?”

“Why must you send men to abduct a poor woman incapable of speech, *Ayya*?”

“That, Daughter, is a subject intimately connected to royal affairs and can therefore, not be revealed to you.”

“In that case, respected father, I regret that I cannot answer your questions either.”

“There are ways and means to make you do so, however.”

“Which won’t work upon me.”

“I may even dispatch you to the subterranean dungeons, Woman!”

“None of its cells could possibly hold me.”

“And none of those who entered its gloomy depths once have ever emerged alive.”

“I know one who did, *Ayya*; I travelled all of yesterday in Sendhan Amudhan’s company—”

“Who is he?”

“The son of another aunt of mine. We returned from Kodikkarai together.”

“Why, my daughter?”

“For years I’d cherished a deep desire to gaze at the towering *gopurams*, magnificent mansions, and splendid spires of fabled Thanjavur, not to mention a yearning to seek an audience with Emperor Sundara Chozhar … I hear that he’s unwell, *Ayya*? And how is he now? Would it be possible to meet him?”

“His state of health, I am afraid, is indifferent at best; there is no improvement. You would do well to renounce all desire of a royal audience.”

“Renounce, you say? But how can I, *Ayya*? How may I give up all hope of meeting the Chakravarthy, when I have every intention of revealing the outrageous abduction of hapless women in his so-called *dharmarajyam*, his righteous rule …”

“My patience is wearing thin, Woman; I have not the luxury of engaging in inane arguments with you—neither did I order your abduction, as you term it. Rather, tell me how you entered the palanquin in the first place! Were you forced into it?”

“Not at all, *Swami*. It stood empty as I approached the Thanjai fort; I climbed in of my own free will to escape the downpour.”

“I believe I understand events as they transpired,” Aniruddha Brahmaraayar cast a glance at his disciple. “The bearers must have set down the palanquin somewhere in the midst of the furious rain and gale; this young woman dragged out her aunt, and took her place. The physician’s son likely did not notice as the falling tree knocked him unconscious. The bearers seem to have been ignorant of the switch as well. And all this, I think, must have happened in quite close proximity to the fort entrance,” he mused. “Well, Thirumalai? Is my estimation of the situation close to the truth, do you think?”

“Exactly as it happened, *Swami*. Judging by your description, you might have actually seen it all—as I did.”

“You saw it all? How—and why on earth did you stay silent all this while? Quickly now, out with it!”

“I was approaching the fort in the early, rain-driven hours of the night, when the storm intensified; a gale rose; the downpour increased and trees crashed to the ground. Thinking to wait out the fury, I sought shelter in a *mandapam* by the side of the road—and so did this young woman within a few moments, in company of a young man … likely the cousin she mentioned a while ago. I caught a glimpse of a *rudhraksham* pendant at his neck in a brief flash of lightning and identified him at once as a dyed-in-the-wool Saivite, probably set in his beliefs at such tender years; it occurred to me that I might well pass the time challenging his ideology with a few glorious Vaishnavite tenets. A palanquin was eased down at the entrance to the *mandapam* at this moment; its curtain emblazoned with the Pazhuvettarayars’ palm tree. A woman descended from within, and came towards the couple. There was some sort of covert communication involving gestures in a dark, gloomy corner. Then, I saw this young woman climb into the palanquin—I realized, as

lightning flashed, that she was not the one who'd stepped out. The bearers had noticed nothing; they hoisted up the *pallakku* as soon as the rain eased, and went on their way."

"Ah, so they have practiced cunning deceit upon me, have they? And you were silent all this while too … well, what next? What did the couple do?"

"They left in the palanquin's wake and so did I, after a while."

"But why did you do nothing while all this transpired, pray? Why not attempt to stop her aunt? Surely you did not choose to participate in their wretched conspiracy, did you?"

"Sacrilege, *Gurudevare*—pray do not accuse me of such blasphemous conduct, for never would I even consider such treachery. I didn't even guess all this to be your arrangement, in the first place—if anything, I suspected Chinna Pazhuvettarayar's hand, considering the palanquin's crest. Besides, to even contemplate preventing Mandhakini Devi from doing as she pleases … ah, I might as well try and dam a cyclone, rather than that *maatharasi*! After all, I did embark on one such attempt in Ilankai, to no avail. She knows me, in addition, and would have made a run for it had she recognized me. In which case, no one might have succeeded in capturing her …"
"All of which leads me to the conclusion that the physician's son possesses considerable acumen; he managed to bring her here, after all."

"As to that, *Gurudevare*, I'm not sure that your estimate is quite correct; Mandhakini Devi would've never come this far had it not coincided with her own will … apparently, though, her sentiments changed in the vicinity of the fort."

"That could well be; yes—but she could not have travelled far within such a short period, that *karaiyar* woman. What with storm and rain beating down mercilessly all night, she must be somewhere

nearabouts … and shall be captured, Thirumalai! Perhaps this young lady here knows something of her whereabouts—Daughter, what are you called?”

“Poonguzhali, *Ayya*.”

“Ah, a beautiful name indeed—not that there ever was an equal to bestowing names, when it came to Thyaga Vidangar. Well, Poonguzhali, doubtless you have some assumptions about your *athai*’s possible hideaways … and if you do, reveal them; no harm shall come to her.”

“It could be that I do know where she is, right now,” Poonguzhali acceded, after a pregnant pause. “And I might even share what I know … if you’d return the favour, and reveal your reason for abducting her.”

“I cannot disclose state secrets, Poonguzhali—especially one that is intimately connected to private palace affairs.”

“I’m afraid I too, must disappoint, in that case.”

“There really is no negotiating with the likes of women such as this.”

“But if you were to fulfill a condition, *Ayya*—”

“Ah, the audacity of this woman to set me stipulations … well, what would that be?”

“If you will set her on the throne of Thanjavur and invest her with a crown, I shan’t have the slightest objection to producing her before you.”

“I believe this young lady is a lunatic, Thirumalai.”

“Certainly took you long enough to arrive at the truth, *Gurudevare*. There isn’t the slightest need to ask her anything; I know where her

aunt has hidden herself. At a little distance from the fort lives this woman's cousin Sendhan Amudhan, in a garden; he and his mother serve the Thalikulathar temple with *pushpa kainkaryam*; they offer flowers to the deity—and there stays the lady you seek. Assign me a few men, and she shall be here as soon as possible," Azhwarkkadiyaan announced.

The glance Poonguzhali threw at the Vaishnavite practically pulverized him. "Attempt it, and I shall throw myself in front of the Chakravarthy and lay bare all my complaints—reveal every single outrageous crime you've committed to the entire world!"

"I fear we've been left with no choice but to bundle her into the dungeons," sighed Aniruddhar.

"Approach me—and I'll murder you!" Poonguzhali pulled out the dagger at her waist again, and brandished it.

"Far from imprisoning her, *Ayya*, why not introduce her into Ilaiya Piratti Kundhavai Devi's palace? The princess resides here at the moment, doesn't she? She might well cure this one of her madness, not to mention making use of her; she may have something in mind, I'm sure."

"An interesting assumption, but why? What possible use could Ilaiya Piratti have of this woman?"

"Surely there is nothing of which your omniscient self isn't aware? Last night's unexpected storm seems to have raised veritable hell all along Chozha Nadu's coastlines … envoys from all four directions are teeming at your palace doors this very moment—"

"Ah, yes indeed—I must meet them all, as you say; too much time has passed in wrangling with this one; a blessing if she had actually been born mute—"

“The better to torment and torture me without consequence, I suppose,” Poonguzhali muttered.

“I hear that Naagai was in a great deal of peril; apparently the ocean surged inland and almost submerged the entire town!”

Both Mudhanmandhiri and boat-girl jumped, startled at the information.

“… and Ilaiya Piratti might well put in an appearance to glean the truth herself,” finished Azhwarkkadiyaan, tongue firmly in cheek.

His voice had barely died away, when the entrance to the palace erupted in a confused barrage of cheers and welcoming chants. “Good God, Thirumalai—when did you acquire the gift of foresight?” Aniruddhar murmured, as he rose and walked towards the door.

Through those self-same doors, almost simultaneously entered Kundhavai Devi and Vanathi.

The moment her eyes alighted on Poonguzhali, standing in a corner, Ilaiya Piratti’s face lost its expression of concern; it brightened, a smile of mingled surprise and delight edging her lips.

Chapter 24

The Princess’s Haste

Having duly extended a courteous welcome to the princesses and shown them to their *peedams*, Aniruddhar followed suit. “Surely a word, and I would have arranged to meet you myself, *Devi*? Why the

haste to seek an audience, may I know?" he asked. "The Chakravarthy is well, I presume?"

"His physical health is much the same, I should say—but his mental health, I'm afraid, is something else altogether; his temperament is far from tranquil, especially in consequence of the raging storm last night. So terrible was its effect that he barely closed his eyes in sleep, lamenting often the fate of the poor, forced to endure pouring rain and privation in flimsy huts … there's a pressing need, he feels, to offer all possible aid and assistance to lives ravaged by the cyclone. You perceive in me his envoy, tasked with this mission at the break of dawn," Kundhavai explained.

"But, someone as powerless as myself—what could I possibly accomplish?" Aniruddhar metaphorically spread out his hands. "I am Mudhanmandhiri in name only; you must know, surely, that Periya Pazhuvettarayar is absent from the city at this moment—having securely locked up his treasure vault into the bargain. Not even his younger brother Kalanthaka Kantar can access those riches without his permission. Matters standing thus, would it be possible to even consider my support towards uplifting the poor? Likely, your highness is aware of the scores of people waiting at my gates—scores that I am embarrassed to meet, for fear of rejecting their pleas," Aniruddhar sang small, putting on a creditable display of paucity. "Doubtless the princess has now divined my hesitation in stepping outside."

"If these be your concerns, *Ayya*, pray cease and desist from the hesitation you mentioned; I'm prepared to offer the entirety of my personal belongings—as is my mother. You may have access to every single item of value in the Chakravarthy's palace; that's my father personal assurance. Pray, *pray* make arrangements—even if only temporary—towards relief efforts for the afflicted poor …"

"Offering your own possessions—as magnanimous as that is—would be akin to gathering kernels of corn to satisfy an elephant's ravenous hunger; barely sufficient, and just as senseless. Practically all of

Chozha Nadu was savaged by the storm last night; the extent of damage and destruction everywhere and the consequent scale of reparation are as yet unknown; I have received no proper reports yet. My own disciple here, my *paramaanandha seedan* brings the most horrendous news: apparently the roiling sea surged inland and submerged entire towns everywhere, from Kodikkarai to Naagai …!"

The fact that the expressions of all three women in the room reflected a sudden, sharp twist of terror did not go unnoticed by Aniruddhar.

"Not that I place complete belief in his words," he continued almost at once, in somewhat soothing tones. "Rumours have a habit of spreading faster than cyclones; there has not yet been time for communiqués from the coast—messengers, even on horseback, will begin to arrive only late this afternoon. In the meantime, however, we shall offer what solace we can."

Kundhavai managed to gather the tattered shreds of her composure. "Rumours of Naagai reached me as well, *Ayya*; my visit here was to confer with you about that as well. Only recently did we donate *nivanthams* to the Choodamani Viharam—what of the fate of the poor *bikshus*, should something befall them?" Her gaze alighted upon Poonguzhali, standing a little aside. "Why, this young woman here, of all places—! Kodikkarai Thyaga Vidangar's daughter Poonguzhali, isn't she?"

"Indeed—but hardly a meek soul like our lighthouse-keeper; rather a rascal of a wench who pokes her nose into matters not her concern," the Mudhanmandhiri critiqued.

Ilaiya Piratti, however, was seized by another suspicion: had Aniruddhar brought the boat-girl here to unearth the truth about Arulmozhi Varmar? The man was notorious for his wily schemes; a *mandhiri* truly at home with cunning *thandhirams*, wasn't he? Whatever the reason … "I'm not quite sure that could be the truth," she ventured, deciding firmly to take Poonguzhali's side. "She's a

good girl, isn't she? Do come here, *Amma*; why is the Chief Minister so displeased? You didn't annoy him, did you?"

"*Devi*," Poonguzhali sidled up to Kundhavai. "I'd rather you demand an explanation from the Mudhanmandhiri about who annoyed whom, in the first place."

"Oho, you're in a fury as well, are you? Come, now, my girl," Ilaiya Piratti bid the maiden sit by her. "Why did you have her brought here, *Ayya*?" She asked Aniruddhar. "Your motives were compelling, I suppose?"

"To suppose that I had this young woman brought here is an assumption erroneous in the extreme, *Ammani*, as I had not even the slightest suspicion that such a scallywag existed. If anything, she …" Aniruddhar's voice trailed away, reluctance writ large on his face.

"Why does the Chief Minister hesitate?" Poonguzhali demanded. "Make him spill the rest!"

"She's here by her own volition—in search of her *athai*."

"Her aunt—oh, Sendhan Amudhan's mother, you mean? But surely their home lies outside the fort?"

"Not Amudhan's mother I am afraid; she has another aunt, one who is mute as well. Doubtless, Princess, you too are aware of her existence, this wild woman who wanders the forests of Eezham like a lunatic. I wished to have her brought here upon an important task and strained every nerve to accomplish it; almost had I even tasted success, when—"

"Truly?" Kundhavai Devi straightened, roused to an agitation that defied description. "Where's this lady? I must see her now, this very moment …" and she rose upon the words.

“I seek forgiveness, your highness—for just when the mission was at the point of fulfillment, this young woman interfered and ruined it all.”

“Heavens, Poonguzhali,” Ilaiya Piratti took her seat again, visibly and utterly disappointed. “Is this true? What on earth have you done?”

“Demand an explanation about the means employed by the Mudhanmandhiri to bring my *athai* here, *Devi*,” Poonguzhali practically snapped. “You wouldn’t be quite so quick to judge me, then.”

Said Mudhanmandhiri then offered a concise account of all that had transpired.

“If this be the case,” Kundhavai commented, once it came to an end. “Surely she must be somewhere in the vicinity of the fort? A search could be mounted, I suppose?”

“There is no need for one, fortunately; my disciple informs me that he caught sight of her in Sendhan Amudhan’s hut this very morning,” Aniruddhar offered.

“Why tarry without reason, then? This must be our priority now; let’s set everything else aside, and bring her here ourselves … and if you will not, I certainly shall. Come, Vanathi, it’s time we bid farewell,” announced Kundhavai.

“*Devi*,” Azhwarkkadiyaan interjected at this moment. “I’d rather you put some thought into a plan before rushing in haste; the lady in question is quite likely to flee in terror at the sight of a group of strangers; a surer bet to capture a storm, then, than a scared woman.”

“He is right, I believe; she may well evade us, and all our efforts would have been in vain,” opined Aniruddhar. “What of your sentiments, Thirumalai?”

“You may as well bid this young woman to bring her aunt, for there are only two people in the entire world who can claim any sort of hold over that *maatharasi*—this maiden is one of them.”

“And who might be the other?” demanded the Mudhanmandhiri.

Azhwarkkadiyaan hesitated. “Rumours abound that the other has been lost at sea,” he volunteered, finally.

As though his words had not made an impression, Kundhavai turned to Poonguzhali. “Bring your aunt here as soon as possible, my good *karaiyar* woman; no harm shall come to her here. I must and shall see her on my own account; my mission is most important. You’ll oblige me, won’t you?”

“I shall try what I can, *Amma*—not that the Mudhanmandhiri need have stooped to such schemes as these; if I’d only known—”

“Misdemeanours do occur due to misunderstandings; there’s much in what you say about keeping matters under wraps—I’ve had occasion to understand and rue certain situations myself, you see. Now, bring your *athai* as soon as possible, for I’ve another task for you,” urged Ilaiya Piratti.

“You had better accompany her, Thirumalai,” counselled Aniruddhar. “And should you encounter problems entering through the fortress gates, use the secret passage to our palace.”

Once the duo had left the premises, Kundhavai turned to the older man. “You’d do well to meet, greet and bid farewell to those at your front door; there are matters of great import I wish to discuss with you.”

“So do I, *Thaaye*; in a moment, if you will,” assured the Chief Minister, before leaving the chamber.

“*Akka*,” Vanathi, who had been conspicuously silent all this while, spoke up. “About the other task for Poonguzhali … are you sending her again to Nagapattinam?”

“I am, yes—but there’s no need for you to worry; no harm shall come to Ponniyin Selvan.”

“I—I’d like to go with her, *Akka*.”

“Why on earth, pray? What would *you* do there? Aside from requiring a security detail to guard your delicate self?”

“That boat-girl can’t stand the sight of me.”

“And how did you divine her state of mind, I wonder?”

“Not a word did she speak to me.”

“Not surprising; neither did you.”

“I turned my gaze towards her more than once, but not a glance did I receive in return. I do believe she’s furious with me, for some reason.”

“Indeed, every unmarried woman in the kingdom has reason to visit her wrath upon your head, Vanathi, my dear,” chuckled Ilaiya Piratti. “But their anger isn’t worth a moment of your concern!”

Chapter 25

Aniruddhar's Offense

The Mudhanmandhiri met those gathered at his front entrance, the *aachaara vaasal*, performed due diligence, and returned with all possible speed.

"I have arranged what in me lies, *Ammani*," he announced. "Men have been sent in all four directions to gather information about the storm's ravages; so has a message, to Chinna Pazhuvettarayar—that the treasury be opened under both our aegises."

"*Ayya*, is it true that a subterranean vault in the vicinity of Periya Pazhuvettarayar's palace overflows with treasures past price? I've heard Periya Piratti speak of it …"

“That lady, I believe, builds castles in the air of opening it up just to finance at least a thousand new, phenomenal big temples,” commented Aniruddhar. “Not even I have entered those caverns, *Amma*. Word is that those who have, never see the light of day.”

“Be that as it may, *Ayya*—do you think our duo will taste success at escorting that mute lady? There’s many a slip between the cup and the lip; I’m concerned that what might have come to our hands may not stay with us.”

“If I may ask, *Thaaye*, what do you know of this *maatharasi*? And how? Why such agitation at her mere mention?”

“I learnt of her from the Chakravarthy himself, a few days ago.”

“Indeed? Did he happen to mention that she was alive?”

“No *Ayya*; merely events that had occurred twenty-five years ago. He still believes her to be dead; that explains his extremely chaotic state of mind. Wasn’t it supposed to be you who received and delivered, to my father, the report of her suicide in the sea? How, then, did you know that the *maatharasi* lived still?”

“I had rather intended to ask you the same. How did *you* learn the truth, *Devi*?”

“I’ve no objection to revealing my sources: first, through the Vaanar warrior lately returned from Eezham; then, from my brother Arulmozhi …” Kundhavai paused, stricken, and as though suddenly aware of her unbelievable *faux pas*, swiftly covered her mouth.

“There’s no need whatsoever to speak of Prince Arulmozhi Varmar if you would rather not, *Devi*,” assured Aniruddhar. “I shall, in fact, erase all memory of that name from this conversation, should you so please.”

“Unnecessary, *Ayya*, for my intention in seeking an audience was to reveal the truth as I know it; I’ve had more than enough time to realize that devastation, not betterment is wrought by concealing facts—and at no time was I more aware of this, than last night. My young brother wasn’t taken by the sea, *Ayya*. Far from it: Samudhra Rajan saved Ponni’s beloved son and brought him safe to shore, where he currently dwells in the safety of Naagai’s Buddhist *viharam*. This was the reason for my visit there—to meet him. I’ve had a suspicion, however, that none of this is exactly news to you.”

“A suspicion well-founded—but hardly one, *Devi*, where I could be accused of awareness as I surely went to great lengths to conceal it? One of my long-avowed resolutions is to resist from interfering in all and any of your affairs, your highness—a mandate that extends to my men as well; it is one of my firmest convictions that any mission of your undertaking is always for the best. We would often confer amongst ourselves, Malayaman, Kodumbalur Velaan and I, that *had Ilaiya Piratti only been a man, she would have brought all the world under the unquestioning authority of the Chozha state umbrella, and ruled with an iron hand*.”

“There was a time when I built such castles in the air too; that despite being a woman, I would see the fulfillment of my ambitions, my *manoradhams* through my brothers—a castle in the air that I’ve now demolished with my own hands, *Ayya*, having learnt a bitter lesson: that women ought never to interfere in affairs of state. Witness my decision to have my brother hidden in Nagappattinam’s Choodamani Viharam—witness its terrible consequences!”

“I am afraid I have witnessed none, *Amma*. Surely the Lord of the Oceans who rescued Ponniyin Selvan from the raging sea would not abandon him on land?”

“If you could reassure my father on this count immediately—”

“Ah, the Chakravarthy is aware, then? Of the prince’s current residence in Choodamani Viharam?”

“I made it known to him last night. Rather, I was forced into doing so.”

“Unfortunate! A postponement of a few days might have worked wonders, for I believe yours to have been a most superior arrangement, *Devi*. The whole of Chozha Nadu has been seething and roiling; the savage storm that raged last night has been burning in the hearts of our citizens for a while. The people are furious with Madhuranthakar and the Pazhuvettarayars, firm in the belief that the Chakravarthy lies imprisoned in his own castle. They are aware of ships being sent to arrest the prince, and most swear that the Pazhuvoor lords arranged to have him drowned at sea. Imagine the turmoil that would ravage the kingdom if they had merely an inkling that he was here, now, in the country—the cauldron of public sentiment would simply boil over; the people would rise up in seething rebellion and start a revolution to crown him king at once. The Pazhuvettarayars are already straining at the leash to unleash their forces in a savage war; Kodumbalur Periya Velaan is marching towards Thanjavur at the head of a massive force of his own. I fear, I very much fear, *Devi*, that Chozha Nadu is about to be awash in blood; that this land of undeniable greatness shall be subjected to the worst of internecine war … and I pray, day and night, to the omniscient Sri Ranganathar that a brothers’ battle may not rend this kingdom beyond recovery.”

“My prayers are towards the same end, *Ayya*. No longer do I wish either of my brothers to ascend to this *samrajyam*’s dignities; I’ve no objection, in fact, to Madhuranthakan being crowned monarch—not anymore.”

“Perhaps—but I am afraid the good citizens of this country do, very much. May the Chakravarthy live and rule long over us but if, God forbid, something were to befall his gracious majesty, Chozha Nadu would be plunged in a bloodbath on a scale hitherto unseen—”

“To tell the truth, *Ayya*, I’m terrified that such a fate may come to pass much sooner than expected. The Chakravarthy’s state worsened so swiftly last night that I was forced to reveal Ponniyin Selvan’s safe residence … not that he believed me for a moment. He assumed me to be merely offering soft words of meaningless consolation; so convinced was he that that wretched woman’s spirit, forced to a terrible suicide years ago, was now intent on avenging her death …”

“God have mercy—what horrors are these? Pray, pray reveal all that occurred last night!”

“The very reason for my visit, *Ayya*—that and to seek your valuable counsel to repair the situation. The Chakravarthy recounted the entire history during my last visit to the city, to inaugurate the Sundara Chozhar Infirmary—of how a *karaiyar* woman had saved him from becoming a bear’s prey when he’d been shipwrecked off Eezham—his idyllic life with her on an island paradise; golden days and months spent in a heavenly haze, as though amongst celestial beings in a dreamscape … his eventual return to this very Thanjaipuri, orchestrated by the palace—the glimpse of her amidst the heaving crowds at the entrance—the gravely important errand he immediately sent you, his dearest friend on, to find her at all costs—and your disappointing return, reporting that she’d taken her life by falling into the sea—everything, he described everything. And ever since he learnt of her death, he confided that her spirit had been haunting him often—and that of late, the *karaiyar* ghost’s visits had increased in frequency.”

“Did you believe all of it, *Devi*?”

“So fantastic was my father’s tale that I had to confess to being utterly confounded. I did wonder, in the beginning, if the haunting might be the outrageous consequence of one of his delusions, a result of *sithabramai* … but later, doubts began to rear up, especially once I recollected certain memories: the night, for instance, that my friend Vanathi heard the Chakravarthy’s lament and went to

investigate—fainting, instead, petrified at the sight of a figure in front of his bed that closely resembled the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani. I suspected some sort of connection right then, between the young queen and the *karaiyar* lady—a suspicion that strengthened upon hearing what Vallavarayar and Arulmozhi had to say. *Ayya*, could it be—could it be that Nandhini Devi is perhaps that mute woman's daughter?"

"Like you, one may only speculate, *Thaaye*. Their remarkable resemblance certainly encourages such a train of thought, but surely a mere likeness of features is hardly proof of relationship? An argument could even be made for Nandhini Devi being the *karaiyar* lady's youngest sibling. A puzzle whose intriguing pieces are currently in the hands of three; three who know the truth for sure …"

"And who might they be, *Swami*?"

"One, of course, is Periya Piratti Sembian Maadevi. I have reason to believe that she harbours some sort of grievous secret, a secret that torments her heart night and day—one that we shall never know unless she decides of her own volition, to divulge. All I am aware of is that she revealed it to Kandaradhithar upon his deathbed, but that saint breathed his last before he could share more than two words with me."

"And the other two, *Ayya*?"

"Mutes incapable of speech—Sendhan Amudhan's mother and aunt, I mean. Of these, nothing can be learnt from the former; she claims complete and unswerving allegiance to Sembian Maadevi and will reveal nothing until that pious lady breathes her last. That, *Devi*, is the very reason for my straining every last nerve to bring Mandhakini Devi all the way from Eezham …"

"Ah, is that the *karaiyar* lady's name? And you knew that she lived still? How?"

“Hardly a matter for astonishment, *Devi*, as I have been privy to that information for more than twenty-five years.”

“What on earth—?” Kundhavai straightened in astonishment. “You knew—you’ve known for all this time—but never breathed a word to my father! *Ayya*, surely you knew—didn’t you fathom his unrelenting torment at the very thought of her death for even a moment? Surely you understood that it relinquished him not in all these years—”

“I did, *Thaaye*. I did, indeed.”

“And yet, you revealed not a hint of the truth.”

Aniruddhar heaved a heavy sigh, the conflict raging in his heart clearly reflected, for once, upon his usually phlegmatic countenance. “Twenty-five years ago, *Devi*, I committed a crime—a crime, the details of which I have disclosed to no one thus far. Your gracious father bid me hunt down the *karaiyar* woman, did he not? So I did; I set off at once in obedience with a few men, and reached Kodikkarai with all possible haste—where we learnt that she had dived off the top of the lighthouse into the raging sea. There were witnesses to her terrible end; Thyaga Vidangar himself retailed it all, his body shaking with nerves, his tongue barely able to form the words—words which I faithfully repeated to my friend—“

“But—where’s your offense, *Ayya*?”

“Here, *Devi*: the *karaiyar* woman might have jumped into the sea, but neither the fall nor the waters killed her. She was seen and promptly rescued by a *valaignan*, a fisherman who took her into his boat and landed a good distance from Kodikkarai. I caught a glimpse of his craft as it beached shore, and recognized the woman in it. I bribed him with unheard of amounts to take her to Ilankai—and keep her there—to which he agreed. I returned to Thanjai and informed the Chakravarthy of the *karaiyar* woman’s death—all with the purest of intentions; an offense I perpetrated in the knowledge that I was doing

him a world of good … never, ever anticipating that it would lead to such terrible, unforeseeable consequences …”

“The execution might have been a crime, *Ayya*, but the intent was quite far from it,” Kundhavai interjected. “You sought my father’s happiness, after all. And so? Did you receive reports of her from time to time?”

“Why not? Often, as it so happens. Immediately post his coronation as the crown prince, Sundara Chozhar left for the warfront at Madurai and I, to the holy *kshethram* of Kasi, where I spent a few years immersed in the study of the *Vedhas*, scriptures and *shasthrams*, various sacred texts, and finally returned—to be startled at the sight of Eesana Siva Battar’s father engaged in intimate conversation with the *karaiyar* woman in Pazhaiyarai. He divulged a truly astonishing piece of news: of her stay for a few days in Periya Piratti’s royal garden, where she gave birth to twins—and abandoned them, into the bargain. Also volunteered was the information that she returned sometimes, on a whim, to see the children—with no one’s knowledge, of course. I asked him the fate of said children, but he refused to reveal any more, stating that that was a secret in the domain of Sembian Maadevi alone. *Let sleeping dogs lie*, I thought and forbore to press any further. Doubtless you remember, *Devi* about people declaring that Mother Kaveri herself had saved little Arulmozhi when he tumbled into the river … well, instinct whispered to me, then, that his saviour was, in truth, the *karaiyar* woman …”

“Your instinct would seem to have been right, *Ayya*, for Arulmozhi said the same, having met the *maatharasi* in Eezham. But oh, hark at this: my father offers his own bizarre explanation—that it’s her ghost that has taken to terrorizing his children! Last night, the emotional storm ravaging the Chakravarthy’s heart reached its peak even as the gale raged and seethed in the skies above; he slept not a wink, and wouldn’t let us do so either. He retailed the old memories all over again, sobbing wildly that it was she, the one who had taken her own life in the ocean, now avenging herself upon him; *she’s*

drowned Arulmozhi in revenge, he screamed. *She won't rest until she's taken her bloody revenge upon Karikalan as well*! His thoughts grew more chaotic with each passing moment; he was beside himself with blind panic. *Will you not show pity, Yama, and take me while at least one son of mine lives*, he lamented—not a word I said to soothe him helped. In the end, faced with such inconsolable grief, I found myself with no choice but to reveal that Arulmozhi was safe and sound, in Naagai's Buddhist *viharam* …"

"And? Did the Chakravarthy receive some respite, achieve solace at least then?"

"Not in the least, I'm afraid; if anything, the *sithabramai* now seemed beyond all sane limits. At first, he simply refused to believe that Arulmozhi was alive—it took a great deal to convince him and that, only after I revealed that I'd actually met him. Why hadn't I brought him back, he demanded; I explained that his lingering weakness made travel impossible, and that I would make all arrangements to do so once he was recovered. Also, I thought it expedient to hint upon the chaos that would erupt in the kingdom if I did escort him to Thanjai at this very juncture … only to see his state of mind undergo a complete and utter reversal. *It is this very rajyam that is proving to be an instrument of death to my sons*, he began to rage. *Should it be that it is not for them, their safety is assured; do you now understand why I wish them brought here in such haste*? And then, a wave of panic seized his already fragile mind—this for another reason altogether. So furious was last night's storm that the very palace trembled to its foundations—and after a particularly deafening roar of thunder, my father's madness reached fever pitch. *Daughter, I'm never going to see Arulmozhi alive*, he screamed in sheer, mind-numbing grief. *I know the cyclonic gales and seething whirlwinds that rage and wreck the eastern seas; this night's storm shall raise massive waves the height of coconut trees; the ocean shall surge inland without compunction; Nagapattinam may be lost to us just like Kaverippattinam, aeons ago—and certainly, there is no escape for a puny viharam between the frothing sea and churning canal—that avenging fury, that wretched witch could not take my son in the*

ocean, but plans to kill him on land instead! Wait—just wait—I shall stop her! I shall leave now, and save him myself …! He screamed until his throat was raw, and tried to heave himself off the bed—but was so weak that he couldn't, and fell back. *Ayya*, not even stone and hill could've stood still, had they heard his heartrending wails and sobs of sorrow …"

Tears welled up in Ilaiya Piratti's eyes, then, and coursed down her cheeks.

Chapter 26

Chaos in the Streets

Kundhavai's tears could not but affect her boon companion; Vanathi began to sob as well and even the heart of Aniruddhar, despite having played witness to the best and worst of an extraordinarily eventful life, was considerably moved. "Every one of the Chakravarthy's present sufferings can be traced to this measly sinner, *Thaaye*," he mourned. "How am I to cleanse myself of my sins—what is to be the means of redemption? I know not how I can destroy this root of all destruction …"

"There is nothing you don't know that I must needs tell you, *Ayya* and yet, heed this piece of advice, if you will: reveal the truth of the *karaiyar* woman; that she's alive and well and far from dead, and you'd have gone a long way towards easing my father's mental distress—this, is in fact my reason for this visit; to beg and plead that

you arrange an audience with my *periyannai* … not that there was any need, for you'd done the needful even before I could suggest it," Ilaiya Piratti finished.

"As you say, *Amma*, I too, arrived at the conclusion that apprising the Chakravarthy of Mandhakini Devi's fate was probably the best thing to do, under the circumstances—but mere verbal assurance will not do; how may one bring him to believe that my report all these years was a lie and what I reveal now is the absolute truth? That, *Devi*, is why I used all my resources to escort the lady in question here; surely the Chakravarthy will not be able to deny the evidence of his own eyes? This, in fact, was the rationale behind my visit to Ilankai—but trust the Pazhuvettarayars to naturally twist my motives, and convince the Emperor that I was engaged in a nefarious conspiracy with the prince and Periya Velaar!" exclaimed Aniruddhar. "It is essential that I produce Mandhakini Devi before the Chakravarthy, if only to absolve myself of blame."
"Such an abrupt reveal could prove perilous to his health, *Ayya*. Far better to intimate him of your decision, before you actually execute it," Kundhavai counseled.

"So I shall, *Devi*, for that was my objective: it was my intention to visit the palace this very morning, for instance, once Mandhakini arrived—until Thyaga Vidangar's daughter arrived to neatly poke her nose into my affairs and upset the cart, as they say. One of these days," swore the Mudhanmandhiri. "I shall take great delight in teaching that wretch of a girl a lesson she won't forget!"

"*Ayyo*, pray, pray don't even attempt any such thing, *Ayya*," Kundhavai intercepted, agitated. "I know not if her character is good, bad or indifferent—but she did save Arulmozhi from a watery grave, after all."

"The good God did, rather, *Thaaye*; the divine lord who guards us all as He reclines upon a sea of milk—for what are puny human beings, after all—even this measly young woman—without His endless grace and abundant compassion? Not all the oceans, whirlwinds

upon choppy seas, firestorms, earthquakes or cyclones might lay a cosmic finger upon our prince, should every claim made by astrology, planets and stars be true."

"Divine power indeed that protected him, but even such a heavenly force must needs require a human vessel to manifest itself, mustn't it? I'm intending to send Poonguzhali to Naagai again—pending your approval, of course: should you think otherwise—if it's your opinion, perhaps, that Arulmozhi be brought here in full view of the people—"
"No, *Thaaye*, not at all; far from it, in fact. The better to leave him where he is, safe from public view and awareness until the fate of the Chozha throne is determined one way or the other; until the true successor is resolved upon. Should it be Madhuranthakar, for some reason, your young brother had far rather be dispatched to Eezham once again, as no Chozha citizen worth the name would ever agree to the former being crowned, while the latter was in the vicinity. The land would transform into a bloody battlefield; the *samrajyam* would overflow with rivers of blood …"

"The better option, in other words, would be to return Poonguzhali and Sendhan Amudhan to Nagapattinam, *Ayya*?"

"The best. In fact, if the Chakravarthy should so desire, Arulmozhi Varmar might make a trip to Thanjai, incognito."

"Indeed, his heart might find some ease if he could see Mandhakini Devi and his son for himself."

"He harbours no concerns, I hope, regarding his eldest born?"

"Not at all, for he firmly believes that the man who could intend the slightest harm to Aditha Karikalan doesn't exist," Kundhavai assured him. "Your opinion, *Ayya*?"

"I do not quite entertain the same exorbitant beliefs, I am afraid," Aniruddhar admitted. "Phenomenal when it comes to war-craft, your older brother—but rather gullible in other respects; it would be no

difficult task to deceive and betray him. The Pazhuvettarayars nourish hatred against him; the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani nurtures and evolves in secret the most devious, heinous conspiracies against him … information that I took great pains to intimate through my disciple, to no avail. The man who refused any and every invitation to Thanjai, has willingly accepted one to Kadambur Sambuvaraiyar's palace …"

"I've sent a message to my *thamaiyan* that the young queen of Pazhuvoor might be our sister—and another, to the Vaanar warrior seeking his assistance in saving my brother from whatever befalls him … ah, if only Vallavarayar were here, this very moment! I could have tasked him with the mission to Naagai—"

"Likewise would I have tasked Azhwarkkadiyaan upon his detail, to save him from whatever befell him … an intention I shall fulfill in any case, should you send Poonguzhali upon the same errand."

"A decision I can't make until our envoys return—which they haven't, *Ayya*! I confess that three-quarters of the weight that crushes my heart would be relieved the instant I set eyes on my *periyannai* … you'll make sure to reveal the truth to my father as soon as she arrives, won't you? For I must retail everything to my mother, right from the beginning—"

"Ah, the many travails besetting Malayaman's daughter! And I shudder to think of the Thirukkovilur *kizhavan*'s reaction, when he is finally made aware of all. Well might he set out to annihilate the entire land, should it dawn upon him that it will never be the inheritance of his grandsons."

"You may safely delegate the task of soothing my grandfather's ruffled sensibilities to me, *Ayya*; rather convey your condolences regarding Vanathi—it's her *periyappa* I'm dearly concerned about, for he nurtures not-so-covert ambitions, apparently, about a Kodumbalur princess's ascension to the Chozha throne in the near future; our young woman here might not be disinclined towards that end either."

“*Akka*!” Vanathi interjected in a tone resounding with wrath, at this moment. Her explosive speech was doomed to remain undelivered, however, by the entrance of someone into the chamber: Poonguzhali —whose solitary state drove a spike of unease into the hearts of the three.

“Where is your aunt, my girl?” Aniruddhar demanded, considerably disconcerted. “And what of Thirumalai?”

“My pride’s taken a blow, *Ayya*,” Poonguzhali admitted, in subdued tones. “All my efforts to bring her here as I claimed have failed; I’m defeated.”

“Wait—does this mean that she vanished even before you arrived? Or did she simply refuse to accompany you? Because, if so—”

“Not at all; we actually managed to escort *Athai* into the fort—it was within the fort walls that she mingled with the surging crowds and …” Poonguzhali swallowed. “… disappeared.” Then followed a fairly descriptive account of events as they transpired:

Mandhakini Devi had, fortunately, been in Sendhan Amudhan’s home when her niece and her escort arrived, certain circumstances having forced her into doing so: the previous night’s storm had wrecked havoc upon the humble abode; one of the trees having actually crashed onto its very roof. Amudhan himself, caught in the ferocious downpour was laid up in bed, practically delirious with a fever. The sisters had been engaged in clearing away the debris around the house and setting it to rights, when Mandhakini glimpsed her niece, her face breaking into a pleased smile—a smile that faltered at the sight of Thirumalai. Her visible unease evaporated, when Poonguzhali reassured her that he was on her side. Having decided upon the explanation to be offered between themselves en route—an explanation that would convince Mandhakini to accompany them—niece and escort duly launched into it: the Chakravarthy’s health was in a precarious state; he might breathe

his last any moment; he wished, with all his heart to see *Oomai Rani* one last time for he hadn't forgotten her an iota all these years; this heart's desire, if granted, might even provide a spurt of strength that could prolong his life. All the above Poonguzhali intimated through a series of gestures, adding that this had been Aniruddha Brahmaraayar's desperate motivation behind her abduction; that she, her niece, had in fact spent the night in his palace. In addition, the Chakravarthy's beloved daughter Kundhavai Devi awaited her pleasure to escort *Oomai Rani* into her father's presence, Poonguzhali revealed. Her insistent arguments would seem to have had effect as Mandhakini agreed, upon assimilating the news somewhat, to accompany her niece and Thirumalai.

The Chakravarthy's Velakkara Regiment was about to make an impressive entrance into the fort by the time the trio arrived at the gates; the latter stood aside to let them pass. Mandhakini watched the men with unblinking intensity as they marched past. A large horde practically stampeded through the entrance in their wake; not the greatest efforts on the parts of the sentries to halt their progress and bar the gates were to any avail.

There's no need to mingle with these crowds, Thirumalai counseled. *We'll take a secret passage that leads straight to the Mudhanmandhiri's palace*. Poonguzhali attempted to communicate this to her aunt who, however seemed to evince no interest in their plans, tagging along with the unruly mob through the gates instead. Well aware of Mandhakini's antipathy and general squeamishness towards crowds, the other two gaped at this remarkable turn of events … events that inevitably had their consequences as soon, certain members of the public began to bend their attention towards *Oomai Rani*, and comment on her appearance. *Doesn't she resemble the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani*? flew whispers, alarming Poonguzhali and Thirumalai a good deal; they pushed and jostled through the crowd in front of the mute woman, attempting an impromptu human barricade. This prompted some members of the public to comment morosely on Azhwarkkadiyaan's forward conduct. *Who on earth does this Vaishnavite think he is, harassing a lady*?

rose murmurs—murmurs that reached the last stragglers of the Velakkara Regiment, who turned to investigate the situation. They surrounded Mandhakini in moments, forcing the crowd apart; a move that spun Poonguzhali and Thirumalai further away, outside her orbit.

One of the Velakkara men now approached Mandhakini. *Who might you be, Amma*? He asked. *Has anyone been harassing you? Tell us if so, and we shall hang that bastard at once*!

Oomai Rani, as was her wont, volunteered no information.

Someone else barged in at this point. *Seems to have a remarkable resemblance to the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani, doesn't she?*

Looks like it, commented a third. *Certainly explains her arrogance.*

The entire Pazhuvoor crowd can be defined by their conceit! announced a fourth.

All of this having transpired in the vicinity of Chinna Pazhuvettarayar's palace, it was only natural that a gaggle of his men arrived, prompted by curiosity—and the last, contemptuous comment could not but fall on their outraged ears.

Which scoundrel here dared to slander the Pazhuvoor clan? growled one of them. *Step forward*!
I did, barked the Velakkara warrior in question. *What of it*?

You're the very definition of pompous conceit, retorted the first. *Arrogant as hell—and you're all about to be taught a lesson you won't forget*!

Ha, you dare speak so because you've drowned our prince, do you? Rascals like you are the reason the entire kingdom is ravaged by storms and cyclones! screamed someone else.

What did you just say? thundered a Pazhuvoor soldier, launching himself on the speaker …

… which seemed an unspoken signal for the two posses to fall upon each other amidst a welter of shrieks, growls, shouts and cries.

Long live the Pazhuvoor patrons! screamed a group, while another chanted: *Long live Chakravarthy Sundara Chozhar*!

Kodumbalur Velaar Vaazhga! *Thirukkovilur Malayaman Vaazhga*!

The ruckus had the effect of drawing out Chinna Pazhuvettarayar himself, who paraded into the street upon his stallion—an occurrence that quieted the chaotic crowds at once. The public scattered in all four directions; the Velakkara Regiment marched forward with what dignity they could muster while the Pazhuvoor soldiers seized their chance to cluster around their commander and pour their grievances into his ears. Poonguzhali and Azhwarkkadiyaan, having congregated by the side of the road, discovered that Mandhakini had vanished.

Ayyo, how could this have happened? What on earth are we to do now? A pretty state of affairs in the capital—now Athai has disappeared without a trace! What if she's in danger? Could someone have abducted her all over again? the boat-girl lamented.

Once Chinna Pazhuvettarayar and his cohorts departed, she and Azhwarkkadiyaan ranged back and forth in the immediate vicinity, searching … to no avail: Mandhakini was nowhere to be found.

I'll remain here awhile and keep hunting, Thirumalai said, finally. *You'd better repair to the Mudhanmandhiri's palace at once; inform him and the Ilaiya Piratti about everything that's happened. They'll be able to mount a far more thorough search, for this requires the efforts of more than the two of us.*

Upon Poonguzhali's hesitation to leave, however, he took the pains to bolster her flagging confidence. *Be assured that nothing has befallen your aunt; I'm guessing she likely recognized someone in the crowd—for I saw her sharp gaze fixed in one direction. Thus, her reason behind following the crowd—to dog his footsteps. That, at least, is my supposition. We'll run her down to earth somehow, but first things first; you'll have to report to the Mudhanmandhiri*. Convinced, finally, Poonguzhali retraced her steps to Aniruddhar's abode.

The recital at an end, Kundhavai Devi lapsed into a worried reverie—a worry the Chief Minister himself seemed, strangely disinclined to share.

"Well? Does my caution now merit your concern, Princess? The demon of chaos waits with bated breath for the slightest opportunity to unleash itself; the kingdom would erupt into an inferno, should news of Arulmozhi Varmar be known," he declared.

"Not as long as you remain the Mudhanmandhiri of this *rajyam*," Ilaiya Piratti averred. "Be that as it may, it looks like all my fears about my *periyannai* will come to pass—how on earth do we find her?"

"A fear you need never entertain; now that she's within the fort, there's no escaping without my knowledge—of that, I shall make sure, not to mention hunting her down," Aniruddhar assured. "In fact, if anything, *Devi*—Mandhakini Devi shall not leave without an audience with the Chakravarthy!"

Chapter 27

In the Treasure Vault

It now behooves us—nay, it is essential indeed—to follow Mandhakini Devi since Poonguzhali was reft from her side … as Azhwarkkadiyaan's explanation for her abrupt disappearance into the chaotic crowds of Thanjai was accurate: the man she spotted in the mob surging after the Velakkara Regiment had been none other than Ravidasan.

It is one of nature's inexplicable foibles that those who lack a faculty are often compensated in others. Mandhakini could command neither speech nor hearing; thus, her phenomenally sharp eyesight. Ravidasan had escaped the notice of both Poonguzhali and Azhwarkkadiyaan, as they were completely riveted by the *maatharasi*—for which precise reason he became the irrevocable focal point of Mandhakini.

She had other skills as well, this remarkable lady: an extraordinary perception that could divine the future, good and bad—a perception that allowed her insight into Ravidasan's motives; his presence here, her instinct warned, foretold nothing but disaster. Already aware of his efforts to assassinate Arulmozhi Varman in Ilankai, her eye, now discerning him weaving through the Thanjai throng, never wavered from him for an instant.

Post the height of pandemonium, the crowd scattered in panic at the sudden appearance of Chinna Pazhuvettarayar, didn't it? Not even this general state of disorder could swerve Mandhakini's gaze, which registered Ravidasan and a cohort slip away from the surge and dart into an alley. She discarded the heaving mob the next instant, dogging his footsteps in the same direction.

Pushed and jostled by the confused crowd, Poonguzhali and Azhwarkkadiyaan lost sight of her for a moment—a moment that cost them dearly, for by the time they regained equilibrium and righted themselves, their charge was long gone. Mandhakini herself, having entered the alley, had looked back once or twice, wondering if her guardians had tracked her. The realization that they had not cost her a fleeting pang—before instinct took over, once again, urging her to follow Ravidasan; she heeded its insistent call.

The conniver and his colleague—and he is not unfamiliar to us either, this cohort: none other than Soman Saambavan, one of those we glimpsed as part of the midnight conspiracy in the memorial at Thiruppurambiyam—took the route Vandhiyathevan had chosen at the beginning of this tale, in a bid to escape Kalanthaka Kandar's men.

The duo made their swift way along tiny streets, lanes and paths, barely noticing potholes overflowing with muddy rainwater, and vaulting over trees upended here and there. The previous night's furious storm was still making itself felt: branches rustled stiffly in the occasional slight, chill breeze sweeping through the city; *salasalasala* … flew freezing raindrops amidst the swaying trees. Not the slightest suspicion that they might be shadowed entered the heads of the fleeing men, which meant that they never looked back—not that they would have been able to discern Mandhakini, even if they had.

Their fleet-footed journey came to an end, finally, by the side of the impressive *madhil* that surrounded Periya Pazhuvettarayar's palace gardens—upon which lay uprooted and broken, a large tree,

courtesy the storm. This was a convenience; Ravidasan and Soman Sambavan swarmed up its trunk, over the wall and bounded into the foliage. Mandhakini, her keen eye still tracking them, followed suit.

Bidding his companion stay at a distance, the *mandhiravadhi* walked in solitary state towards the palace, which appeared bleak and bare in the absence of both Periya Pazhuvettarayar and his Ilaiya Rani—barring the sudden echo of female voices. Two maids, *thaathis* arrived at the rear façade of the mansion once, surveying the wrecked undergrowth and ravaged trees sprawling all over the garden.

“What a ruin!” exclaimed one. “This is what Ramayanam’s Asokavanam might’ve looked like, once Lord Anumaar had his way with it.”

“And our very own Sita Devi might have shed tears of grief over its destruction, had she been here,” replied the other.

Having exchanged random comments for a while, the women were about to re-enter the palace, when Ravidasan pursed his mouth to emit an owl’s hoot. The *thaathis* turned around at once—to see nothing as he was well and truly concealed.

“Would you just listen to that—owls shrieking in bright daylight!” exclaimed one. “Last night’s storm must have scrambled their brains too …”

Her companion, however, remained conspicuously silent, and accompanied her colleague into the palace …

… only to return in a little while, to the *vasantha mandapam* that connected the larger mansion and the treasure vault; the same chamber, readers may recall, that had been the venue for Vandhiyathevan’s audience with the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani.

The maid peered into the gloomy garden. The owl hooted again; she moved in the direction of the call.

Ravidasan stepped out from behind a tree, and trained his magnetic gaze onto her face.

“You’re here, now, *Mandhiravadhi*? In the Ilaiya Rani’s absence too … why?”

“I’m here at her behest, Woman,” he retorted.

“So you wouldn’t leave her in peace there either? Why’re you here, though? If anyone suspected—”

“What’s the worst that could happen?”

“Don’t, please. Chinna Pazhuvettarayar already suspects us all; he bid me into his presence, one day, and warned that I had to inform him if the magician stepped foot here again—quite harsh he was, too …”

“Damn him to hell; you needn’t entertain a moment’s worry—he’s doomed, I tell you—they all are. Now, I need the key to the treasure vault; get it right away.”

“*Ayyayyo*, not on my life.”
“Here’s your mistress’s signet ring,” Ravidasan displayed it. “Satisfied?”

“I wonder where you burgled that from? Who knows?”

“Why, you little wretch—! You dare accuse me of theft—me, who sets your precious Ilaiya Rani quaking—you’ve seen her terror yourself, and yet you stand there and … just you wait until tonight: nine devils shall drag you alive to the cremation ground where they —”

“Stop—no—please don’t. You can keep your precious devils; I want no part of them or their nightly nonsense. What’s it all to me, anyway? You’ve shown me her ring; I shall do as you wish. But set aside your haste, please; this is no time to rush things. Maids loiter here all the time to gawp at the ruined garden; I shall have to meet you when everyone’s at their meal. Hold your horses until then.”

“Fair enough; you might bring me food as well while you’re at it. Bring a lot,” Ravidasan amended. “My last meal was two days ago.”

Once she had gone, he rejoined Soman Saambavan; they lounged upon one of the fallen trees and engaged in lazy conversation. Unnoticed, Mandhakini hunkered down as well, concealed at a distance where she could keep an eye on them. She had understood not a word of Ravidasan’s speech with the maid, but suspected that something was afoot.

The *thaathi* returned after a considerable length of time; Ravidasan stepped up to meet her, receiving a collection of keys and a bundle of food. The two repaired to the *vasantha mandapam*, approaching the path that led to the subterranean treasure vault. One key, two, three—and the door creaked open, to reveal an interior shrouded in inky blackness.

“*Adada*, my harebrained foresight that didn’t think to ask for a light,” Ravidasan muttered, as he turned to the woman. “How the devil am I to find my way in this gloomy nightmare? Get a lamp or a torch, at least.”

“And how, if you please, am I to get either of those in broad daylight? What if someone smells a rat—”

“Not my concern, Woman. You don’t expect me to believe that you lack the cunning to do so, do you? I don’t care how you do it, but bring me light—or prepare to be seized by twelve fire-breathing demons this very night—”

“*Ayyayyo*, quiet, for God’s sake!” snapped the maid. “Fine, I’ll make arrangements in a while …”

“By which time I shall make a fine meal,” Ravidasan decided.

The *thaathi*’s departure was the sign for him to heft the bundle on his shoulder, stride into the garden and seek Soman Saambavan. “Considering you might be in a position to spend two or three days in that cavern, you’re likely to make better use of this,” he handed the food. “Now, pick up that spear, and follow me without a sound. The maid has gone to get a torch; you’ll have to sneak into the treasure vault before she returns …”

The duo crept forward silently—and a shadow dogged their swift steps without their knowledge: Mandhakini.

Hidden Meanings and Explanations

Asokavanam

A vast garden space and Sita Devi’s prison on the island of Ilankai, in the epic Ramayanam.

Anumaar

The Thamizhised version of Hanuman, the Monkey God.

Chapter 28

A Passage, Subterranean

Having peered carefully in all four directions, Ravidasan pointed Soman Saambavan towards the door into the treasure vault, and hastened to bundle him inside. “Don’t pause by the entrance just because your eyes find it difficult to acclimatize themselves to the darkness,” he cautioned. “Make sure to wait well inside.”

Once his cohort stepped within, it was as though the inky blackness had swallowed him whole. Ravidasan retraced his steps along the corridor to Nandhini Devi’s *vasantha mandapam* from whence he observed the Pazhuvettarayars’ palace; should anyone barring the imminent *thaathi* arrive, it would be expedient to dart into the vault, secret himself and shut the door, wouldn’t it?

Even as he paused on the threshold, Mandhakini tiptoed into the vault.

Its debilitating darkness could make barely a dent in the composure of a woman well accustomed to the terrifying midnight gloom of dense, dangerous jungles; within moments, her sharp eyes began to discern the surroundings—and glimpsed Ravidasan’s companion butting, haplessly, into a column just ahead. She took the direction exactly opposite, and discovered a staircase through which apparently the vault’s passage descended. She went down the steps … and waited.

Some small sound she made must have reached Soman Saambavan’s ears, for he straightened at once, startled. “Who is it?” He called out. “Who’s there?” It echoed through the chamber and fell faintly on the ears of Ravidasan who caught sight, almost simultaneously, the *thaathi* arriving, torch in hand. Eager to issue a warning to his colleague, he stepped back into the vault. “Where are you, Saambava? Did you call me?”

“I did, yes.”

“Such haste—what if someone had heard you? You didn’t really think I’d just leave you to your own devices, did you?”

“All I wanted was to ask you something,” Saambavan stepped close to Ravidasan … when, abruptly, a bright light flooded the vault’s entrance.

“Looks like the maid’s here—go, now, leave before she catches sight of you,” the *mandhiravadhi* urged. “Quick—behind that column—hide!”

Saambavan duly obeyed, just in time for the maid to make an appearance. “*Mandhiravadhi*,” she called out, mystified. “Where on earth have you disappeared?”

“Nowhere; merely awaiting your convenience,” Ravidasan stepped forward, relieving her of the torch as he did so. “Now, lock the door—return after a *naazhigai* and tap; open only if I call out,” he instructed. “Make sure no one’s around while you do!”

“Fair enough—but I’m warning you in my turn: Chinna Pazhuvettarayar definitely thinks something’s up; should you get into his clutches, don’t betray me,” she begged.

“I reassured you, didn’t I, that Kalanthaka Kantar and all his crowd were doomed to hell? Cease this pointless apprehension, Woman.”

“Why need me to return just to open the vault, then? There’s another path out of this cavern, after all—”

“—which would be no use today, as the Vettaaru is in full spate; go now, and return in a *naazhigai*.”

The *thaathi* obeyed and bolted the door from without, at which precise moment Ravidasan followed suit, within. Then, he hefted aloft the torch and strode swiftly towards Soman Saambavan. “Wanted to ask me something, didn’t you? Go on, now.”

“Did you come in here, once before?”

“More than once, I should say; where on earth do you think all the treasure we’ve hoarded comes from?”

“You’ve missed my meaning. You left me and walked out a while ago; did you return—”

“Only now.”

“Not in the middle?”

“Neither in the middle nor on the sides; what’s the point of all this?”

“A few moments after you left, the light at the entrance dimmed—and I practically bumped into a pillar.”

“Likely the door opened and closed of its own accord.”

“It seemed like a figure entered … I heard footsteps. Quite clearly, too.”

“The result of your *sithabramai* and nothing else—and the fault of this vault too, I must admit: this morbid cavern can certainly muddle minds—shadows flit through the darkness; lights flicker off and on; strange noises echo through the chambers. Some of those who passed through gave up the ghost through pure fright; their skeletons litter these dank corridors—all the Pazhuvettarayars’ devious plot; they’ve left the bones as they were found so that those who stumble onto them might die of pure, unadulterated panic.”

“Would that even be possible? To enter this vault with no one being the wiser?”

“Not usually, no—and I don’t think anyone aside from me has, either; something even I could accomplish only with the aid of the Ilaiya Rani or her maids.”

“But you mentioned human skeletons, just now.”

“Oh, that. A Pazhuvettarayar ruse, again—keeping the vault’s door slightly ajar in a bid to trap those they wished to consign to the devil. The idiots attracted by gold and coin would step in—to never step out.”

“Do you really mean to say that no one save you has ever escaped this cavern alive?”

“Until recently, yes … I’ve my own doubts though, now—about two in particular.”

“You speak of Vallavarayan and Kandamaaran, I know.”

“Indeed.”

“And we’ve spared both … for what reason, exactly?”

“I’ve lost count, I declare, of the number of times I’ve offered an explanation: that the Ilaiya Rani has let Vandhiyathevan live for a purpose; that he will breathe his last the moment Sundara Chozhan’s clan is annihilated—their end is nigh … but come, now; I shall reveal this cavern’s secret paths and subterranean passages—be warned in one respect, however; somewhere hereabouts is a *mandapam* overflowing with precious gems; the result of a hundred years of Chozha supremacy, covering every inch of the floor in huge, shimmering heaps—a mesmerizing vision of *navarathnams* that would stupefy anyone and swerve them from their purpose; make sure that you never lose sight of yours!”

“Take care what you say, Ravidasa; don’t *you* lose sight of the fact that like you, I too swore a bloody vengeance upon Veera Pandiyan’s decapitated corpse—”

“A fact no one’s about to deny; all I did was issue a warning about losing yourself to those wretched gems for they swayed even my

stalwart heart, for a moment. Be that as it may, come now; I must show you the passage leading to the Chozha palace first, after which you may explore these caverns to your heart's content. Mapping out this vault might even come in useful, at some later date."

Torch held high, Ravidasan set off, Soman Saambavan by his side.

They trod the path Periya Pazhuvettarayar and Ilaiya Rani Nandhini had taken once, not so long ago.

The gloomy *nilavarai*'s massive columns loomed large in the flickering, sooty light of the oil-torch; their sinister shadows falling at bizarre angles like inky demons. Bats flitted on soft, eerie wings through pitch blackness like terrifying, tiny ghosts. Massive cobwebs stretched in the air, sporting phenomenally huge spiders while on the ground scurried mysterious creatures, some scuttering away on swift legs; others crawling at snail's pace. Strange, inexplicable noises echoed across the cavern just as Ravidasan had predicted; remnants of the storm still raging outside crept into the chambers somehow, from somewhere, reverberating around the thick walls.

"Ravidasa," Soman Saambavan stopped abruptly, startled. "There—don't those sound like footsteps?"

"Of course they do—ours, you sniveling idiot. Don't let the thud of mere feet send you into a panic, now … how on earth are you going to endure two or three days here if you can't even abide a few moments —with me by your side?"

"I'm not panicking; far from it—all I'm doing is trying to make sure now that nothing's amiss, rather than give in to needless alarms and excursions later, in your absence," Saambavan hastened to cover up his nervousness. "You mentioned that some of those who'd entered the *nilavarai* died here, didn't you?"

"Indeed, and their spirits doubtless flit about these nightmarish chambers; what of it? Surely they flee in terror at the very sight of

us? Remember that that petty youngster Vandhiyathevan actually made it out of this vault, wits and nerves intact; surely we stand a better chance, we who've bested ghosts and ghouls without count?"

"Who cares about the supernatural, when there could be a dozen creatures of the natural with poison dripping from fangs and claws?"

"Don't dare say you'll scream in blind panic at snakes and scorpions when they scuttle away from us, burrowing into lairs …"

"Still, to spend two or three days in these gloomy chambers, waiting for hours on end—Ravidasa, if an opportunity should arise before—"

"No, never; don't even yield to that temptation—you couldn't make a worse mistake. It is *Sevvai* today; a Tuesday; you must wait out *Budhan* and *Vyaazhan*—make sure you find out when Sundara Chozhan is alone, for his *pattamakishi* is always by his side. But there is a time when she leaves him to his own devices; when she makes a short pilgrimage for certain to the Durga Parameswari shrine on Friday nights—and that is the night you must fulfill our mission; that is the night Sundara Chozhan's lineage faces annihilation," Ravidasan swore. "Else, all our precious plans shall go to rack and ruin!"

They strode at a considerable pace all through this conversation; Soman Saambavan alone darting swift, scared glances here, there and everywhere—glances that served no purpose at all, for a shadow dogged their footsteps, concealing itself behind large columns, bounding forward on agile feet—*Oomai Rani*, who followed them without their knowledge. By now, they had crossed from one end of the vault to the other, where a massive *madhil* obstructed their way with not a door or path in sight. Chinks of light flickered from somewhere at the top of the wall, however, through a small *palagani*, a window.

Ravidasan handed the torch to Saambavan and began to climb up the sheer wall, shrewdly finding and clutching at knobs and

protrusions; reached the window and having stared through it for a while, slithered swiftly down.

“Am I supposed to leap through that *palagani*?” Saambavan asked. “Is that the way out?”

“For rats, perhaps, not humans certainly,” Ravidasan countered. “You can, however, have a view of the Chozha palace from here—a clear view, especially, of a very specific location within the palace.”

“Sundara Chozhan’s sickbed?”

“Yes, and you can use it to gauge the general movement of people thereabouts. Now, come; observe what I do, and learn …”

Ravidasan bent, stared keenly at some point, pressed a foot on a circular stone, grabbed hold of a square block, and pushed hard. Beneath … creaked open a passage.

“Good God—an underground path in a subterranean cavern?” Saambavan marveled.

“No one but Periya Pazhuvettarayar and the Ilaiya Rani know its existence—well, so do I and now you, I suppose. You’ve observed the way to open it, haven’t you?”

The duo descended into the passage; the light of the torch faded and vanished, after a while. Mandhakini bounded from her hiding place and peered into the gaping entrance, going so far as to place a foot on a step—before thinking better of it, and withdrawing.

Lost in reverie for a while, she glanced up at where Ravidasan had clambered up the wall, before … and sprang forward, practically leaping up the same way he had, reaching the *palagani*, where she made herself a seat and stared at what lay in front of her eyes. Outside spread a beautiful vista: the garden hugging the wall and beyond, a sprawling, captivating palace complex.

Goosebumps prickled her skin; exhilaration raced through her veins; she thrilled at the awareness that within those walls lived those dear to her heart; nay, dearer than even her soul. Realization struck once again, beyond all doubt, that they were in grave peril, about to be endangered by the men currently striding through the subterranean passage.

Never had she prayed harder than she did then, to the divine power that ruled her *antharaathma*; the deepest recesses of her heart and soul—that she be granted the means and strength to prevent Ravidasan and Soman Saambavan from fulfilling their fell intentions.

Just as she was wondering if it might be time to descend, a rather unusual tableau unfolded upon one of the upper balconies of the palace in the distance: Ravidasan and Soman Saambavan, having exited the *nilavarai*, now climbed up, secreted themselves behind several columns and peered into the interiors—obvious, as it was broad daylight. The torch was gone from Ravidasan's hands, while Saambavan held a spear—a spear that passed to his cohort, who aimed it into the palace chamber.

Oomai Rani's heart almost stuttered to a halt at this … only resuming its normal pace when the *mandhiravadhi* lowered the spear, for he had merely been posing. He returned the weapon to Saambavan then; the duo disappeared the next instant.

Mandhakini climbed down from the window as well, gazing intently at the opening to the subterranean passage. Soon, lights flickered as the conspirators returned, torch in hand; emerged from within, and closed the entrance.

"You've learnt the way to open the passage, haven't you?" Ravidasan made sure.

“Very well, so you needn’t worry; rest assured that I shall fulfill our mission to perfection,” Saambavan pledged. “You’d better ensure that you carry out your tasks as well, for Sundara Chozhan shall meet his end this Friday.”

“Karikalan is the Ilaiya Rani’s responsibility, so no fear there. As for the younger tiger cub—it looks as though he’s alive and burrowed in Naagai; not that he can escape this time. The two ghouls who served as his protectors are in Thanjai this very moment—I caught sight of the boat-girl and her mute aunt in the crowds; not to mention that treacherous lout of a Vaishnavite. There’s no way out for the cub; I plan on sending Kramavithan to destroy him. This Friday, Sundara Chozhan’s illustrious dynasty shall be razed to the very roots …”

“What of Madhuranthaka Thevan, then?”

“He may live for all we care, and make sure the Chozha throne is kept warm for a while yet. The Pandiya Chakravarthy must come of age after all, mustn’t he?”

Ravidasan retraced his steps on the word, Saambavan following, their voices fading with the distance.

Chapter 29

A Royal Audience

Once the men departed, *Oomai Rani* padded on silent feet towards the general location of the underground passage, and tried with all

her might to open it—but this proved well nigh impossible; the distance that had been such a boon when she had followed Ravidasan and Saambavan now proved a barrier; she had been too far away when the access hatch had been opened, and not even her phenomenal eyesight could aid, now.

One faculty might have failed, but another came to her assistance; her foresight indicated that at least one of the nefarious duo might return—her best option now was to lie in wait.

Her instincts proved right, once again: having seen Ravidasan off the premises, Soman Saambavan ambled back, torch still in hand—albeit one that burnt less brightly than before. He might have bantered and indulged in bombastic speeches in company of his colleague but the fact that he sent sudden, suspicious glances into every gloomy corner betrayed his barely concealed terror.

Soon, he plunked himself down at the passage's opening, heart clearly thudding in panic—a panic that escalated when the torch finally breathed its last. His eyes kept darting towards the *palagani* at the top of the wall often, taking note of the light fading as the hours passed. When it winked out altogether, he realized that the sun had set, and began to open the passage underneath, again—when Mandhakini seized her chance and approached him stealthily.

He had taken a few steps below … when a long, low *cree ….ech*! echoed mournfully around the chamber.

Now, Soman Saambavan was no stranger to the horrors of life, having encountered his fair share of monstrosities—but not even he had heard any sound as eerie as this; were there such entities as ghosts in this world, their voices, he assumed, would be akin to this unearthly shriek.

The first time it reverberated around the walls, he hesitated until the echoes faded away; the second time, his skin erupted in goose-bumps and the fine hairs on his body prickled; the third time, all

semblance of equilibrium evaporated, his resolve in tatters—especially when the cry sounded close—and he took to his heels in blind panic, running pell-mell through the dark corridors of the cavern, unaware of either path or direction.

Mandhakini watched as he disappeared into the gloom—and descended the staircase which leveled out after a few steps; she strode at a swift pace that would have made it impossible for Saambavan to have caught up, even had he glimpsed her. She walked along what seemed like the very tunnel to a deep and dangerous hell, so long did it extend—but even the longest path has to end at some point and so did this, at the base of a sheer wall, with a small gap at the top. The touch of a hand revealed a few steps; Mandhakini climbed them, only to feel her head butting against the top. There seemed to be a series of gaps between the ceiling and the final step; she sidled through one, and found herself surrounded by colossal figurines of alarming proportions. Accustomed to the massive statues of Eezham, this sight fazed her not a whit. Instead, her eyes raked the vicinity, trying to gauge the exact location of her exit—and discovered that the subterranean passage ended at an imposing figurine of the ten-headed demon-king Raavanan holding aloft the divine mountain abode of Kailaiyangiri in his twenty hands, while Siva Peruman and his consort Parvathi Devi sat in state at the summit. The base of the “mountain” caved in, even while being held by his “hands”—and it was through the gap between two of the said limbs that she had climbed into that *sirpa mandapam*, the chamber of sculptures, Mandhakini realized. So cunningly was the path wrought that not an inkling could be had of its existence underneath the sculpture of Kailaiyangiri; nor would anyone think to investigate the space—an ideal spot, in fact, that could even double as a hideaway.

She spent a while examining the combined marvels of the path and the figurine above, before transferring her attention to the chamber at large. The poor light was no hindrance to sharp eyes used to the pitch blackness of night; every statue was perfectly and clearly visible. There was one of Sibi Chakravarthy for instance, who

hacked out his own flesh to save a dove—and in fact, wasn't the clan name of Sembian derived from this illustrious ancestor? *Oomai Rani* subjected the figurine to a keen stare, before moving on to another—this one of a massive Siva Peruman with the River Ganga flowing down his tresses in long, graceful swathes. By the lord, hands folded deferentially, stood King Bhageeradhan, credited with the herculean accomplishment of having persuaded the river into descending to earth for the benefit of all humanity. Ganga, now named Bhageeradhi in honour of the "father" who had literally birthed her, flowed into the ears of a similarly massive *rishi* and out through his mouth, whereupon her waters were gathered into a *kamandalam* or *gundigai* by a sage of much smaller proportions. This, she divined, could be none other than the illustrious Agasthiyar, also known as *kurumuni*—and he, she saw, had upended the *kamandalam* upon a hillock, releasing a small stream of water—a stream that grew and grew steadily, transforming into a roaring, roiling Kaveri that spread through the sculptural landscape. Doubtless, arrangements had been made once to have water actually flowing along the stone rivers—but there was none now. Instead, the manmade Ponni meandered through rocky outcrops, bleak cliffs and dense wooded copses, Sivan shrines dotting both sides of the banks liberally along the course. Finally, a sheer *madhil* arose at the point Kaveri met the ocean.

Some seed of a suspicion having sprouted in Mandhakini's mind, she placed a hand on the wall and pushed—to see a small door open into the royal garden. Just beyond rose the imposing, beautiful edifice of the palace itself, its artfully designed alcoves and balconies commanding the attention.

In the fading light of dusk, Mandhakini stared around for a few moments, her superior senses immediately informing her that the place was empty. The storm had wreaked the same havoc here as in Pazhuvettarayar's palace garden; it was extremely unlikely that there was anyone actually amidst the ruined undergrowth and wrecked trees, let alone spying her slipping through the secret passage. Nevertheless, she waited by the chamber of sculptures until night

blanketed the land completely as there existed the tiniest percentage of being seen; not to mention the possible return of that demon, that *yamakinkaran* of an assassin, spear in hand—a cautionary impulse that prompted her to peer into the chamber too, at frequent intervals.

Soon, lamps began to twinkle here and there within the palace; the entire complex was ablaze with lights in a matter of moments. The *deepams* illumining the lower levels flashed through the many windows while those on the upper floors dazzled the eye in a way that competed with the very stars.

The entire edifice was resplendent enough to plunge a spike of worry into Mandhakini's heart. *Ayyo, the night seems even more dangerous than day*, she mused.

She inspected every corner of the palace again, as far as she could see—and noticed something new: the section closest to the chamber of sculptures was far less illumined than others. The section, she recalled clearly, that Ravidasan—that wretched rogue who had attempted to assassinate in Ilankai a child more beloved to her than life itself, the son of her heart she had rescued once from the Kaveri—and his evil cohort had climbed upon; the section where the *mandhiravadhi* had paused, borrowed his friend's spear and taken aim at someone within. A stroke of luck indeed that this section was comparatively devoid of light. *I wonder why*, *though*, she thought. *Well; a mystery that would doubtless be solved, soon*.

Mandhakini waited until the last, vague wisps of light faded and the darkness of night settled in—before dashing across the wrecked garden towards the palace with the speed of a terrified gazelle.
Many were the beautifully designed circular courtyards with impressive supporting columns and staircases leading to upper floors dotting this rear section; said courtyards liberally littered with entire sets of gigantic copperware, vessels and ladles used for state dinners and royal feasts; ivory palanquins long past their prime and thrones, broken and chipped with age. She ranged around these

bizarre relics of age, before finally gathering her courage to climb up a staircase that led to one of the balconies.

Upstairs, the interiors that met her eyes were almost a duplicate of those below: vast, circular courtyards; ceilings held by impressively carved columns; intricately designed, ornate windows and moonlit terraces sporting marble benches.

Amongst these lonely terraces and solitary courtyards flitted Mandhakini like an unearthly spirit; an apparition haunting spaces devoid of human presence.

A nameless hesitation seized her whenever she contemplated approaching the inner edges of the balconies overlooking the chambers within; she simply couldn't bring herself to do so. Once, though, she glimpsed the flickering light of lamps streaming up from below, crept to a column nearby, and peered down.

Ah, what did she see, there? What was the sight that met her startled eyes? What tableau spread beneath her amazed and astonished vision, freezing her to absolute stillness, preventing her from looking away?

In the midst of a spacious chamber, upon a beautifully embellished, ornately carved *sapramanja* couch reclined a man. Four women and two men surrounded him, deference and devotion apparent in their mien. Further apart stood two *thaathis*, even more obsequious than the others, if possible.

A lone lamp was the only source of illumination for the entire *mandapam*; a lamp fixed to a stand by the bed, offering feeble light at best. Mandhakini's attention focused onto those around the couch, first, identifying one of the women: her heart's beloved and her brother's daughter, Poonguzhali. The rest were somewhat familiar as well, she having glimpsed them occasionally from concealed hideouts—but of their exact identity, she was unaware.

Having expended a great deal—more than strictly necessary, in fact—of attention on the rest, Mandhakini turned finally, with considerable, nay extreme reluctance, to the figure on the bed … and for an instant, her heart almost stuttered to a stop.

It was him.

Yes—yes, it was … it was him! The shipwrecked man who had captivated her naïve, innocent heart and soul all those years before—so long ago, in fact that those years might well be aeons shrouded in the mists of time—when she had been naught but a chit of a girl, free as the wind and just as spirited, flitting through forests without a care in the world; the man who had, for a very brief idyll, transformed Boodha Theevu, that most mundane of islands into a paradise unequalled even in the heavens … ah, how he'd changed!

Long, long after those golden days which still reigned in her mind as a glorious lifetime, an entire previous birth even, Mandhakini had glimpsed him more than once without his knowledge. Stalked him through the rough foliage and scratchy shrubbery of Kaveri's banks as he sailed gaily in richly decorated royal crafts. Tracked him along streets heaving with excited crowds as he rattled along in a dazzling golden chariot harnessed with stallions white as snow. Not for a while though; a considerable amount of time had flown since she saw him last … time that had wrought its ravages; that had changed him almost beyond all recognition.

A moustache and beard now cloaked those finely chiseled features; skin now stretched tightly over hollowed, gaunt cheeks; fine lines ploughed a smooth forehead once alien to wrinkles … ah, those eyes! Eyes that had once gleamed with an almost celestial light—what had happened to them? Where had that glow vanished? Good God, was it even possible for people to change so much?

Watching him, wide-eyed, a sudden train of thought could not but obtrude. She was no stranger to the sight of whole and healthy men turn into frail shadows of themselves, wracked by Ilankai's terrible

ague, ravaged by weeks of venomous fever. Death marked their sunken eyes and bleak faces.

Was—was this man too, marked for a similar fate? Was he, whose face had once shone with the radiance of a golden sun, now awaiting the end of his life?

Abruptly, the memory of what she had witnessed that very evening assaulted her: the assassin Ravidasan and his equally murderous brother-in-arms standing here, at this very spot—and aiming a spear, to boot. Had their intended target been the man on the sickbed?

The sudden realization struck her almost like a physical blow. Her body shook in the grip of debilitating tremors; she felt lightheaded, as darkness crept into the edges of her vision. Almost on the verge of collapse, she clutched the column with a deathly grip, planting her feet firmly on the ground, trying with all her might to regain the tattered shreds of her composure.

Chapter 30

Accusation

For quite some time, Sundara Chozhar's health, both mental and physical, had been in a gravely perilous state: his body vulnerable; spirits weighed down, his emotions raw; his temperament fragile—Ilaiya Piratti's account to Aniruddhar that he had not slept a moment the night of the storm had been no exaggeration. His delicate sensibilities had already been in disarray all day—a state exacerbated by Chinna Pazhuvettarayar's official visit that afternoon.

For the Chief of Thanjai security had had a great deal to say—especially of the Mudhanmandhiri. The Chozha capital's Chief Minister, complained Kalanthaka Kantar, had been the main reason behind the complete and comprehensive breakdown of security; that defenses set in place for the Chakravarthy himself were now in question due to a barrage of visitors, all of whom claimed an audience with Aniruddhar and whose credentials could not be traced … two accusations that produced a rather rueful smile upon Sundara Chozhar's withered face, so little emphasis did he place upon them.

There were others leveled by Kalanthaka Kantar upon his longtime friend, however; far more serious allegations that the Chakravarthy could no longer ignore—of an argument between a flood of new entrants into the city and the Velakkara Regiment that rapidly escalated into an almost bloody massacre, diffused only just in time by the unexpected but timely intervention of Chinna Pazhuvettarayar himself, who managed to save the volatile city from riots by talking sense into both ruffled parties, upon which the seething crowds dispersed.

As if all this turmoil were not enough, the Mudhanmandhiri was now said to have had a hand in abducting a random woman all the way from Kodikkarai—having asked for and used the Pazhuvoor palanquin and men for his extremely suspicious activities, too. Was this worthy, Kalanthaka Kantar demanded, of a man renowned throughout the kingdom for his piety and moral rectitude? Was this behavior in keeping with that of an official synonymous with integrity

and righteousness? And if aught should transpire as a result of these unseemly goings-on, would they not be laid at the door of the Pazhuvoor clan, in that they had actively aided and abetted in said abduction?

And then came the crowning glory for, in characteristic fashion, Chinna Pazhuvettarayar had reserved the worst of his accusations for the last—an incident that had been the cause of not inconsiderable consternation: “I had been concerned for quite a while about reports that a *mandhiravadhi* visited Periya Pazhuvettarayar’s palace often. No action could be precipitated as it appeared that he sought audiences with Ilaiya Piratti as well—still, I kept the mansion under surveillance, which paid off: my spy informed that he had spotted someone climbing over the rear wall of the treasurer’s palace. I delivered instructions to have the intruder brought to me at once and in fact, my guards captured a man red-handed in that very garden … a man that I learnt was none other than the Mudhanmandhiri’s beloved disciple Azhwarkkadiyaan.

“My interrogation about the reason for his presence there yielded no result; he simply cited the chief minister’s orders and stayed stubbornly silent. How may I possibly continue to be responsible for the city’s security, your majesty, if such be the activities sanctioned by Aniruddha Brahmaraayar?” He criticized. “Of course, there would have been no need to bring all of this to your attention, my liege, had my brother been present …”

The first few moments of this masterful speech might have resulted in complacency, but the last had their intended effect; the Chakravarthy’s agitation, subdued until then, spiked. “Very well,” he acceded slowly. “I shall make enquiries of Aniruddhar when he arrives this evening—especially about the alleged abduction of a woman from Kodikkarai; I must confess that that report pains me deeply …” the Chakravarthy paused. “A report that is true, I hope, Thalapathy? There can be no doubt about its veracity, can there?”

“Not in the slightest, for the palanquin-bearers and their escorts divulged all at midnight, last night. The cavalcade appears to have been caught in the storm in the vicinity of the fort, where a tree by the road apparently crashed upon them, injuring some. Word is that it was a great piece of good fortune that the palanquin did not end up being a casualty, for that would have resulted in the grievous sin of *sthreehathi*, the demise of a woman. I must beg the gracious Chakravarthy to investigate not only this mysterious affair, but also Azhwarkkadiyaan’s devious doings,” Chinna Pazhuvettarayar delivered a parting shot, before gracefully retiring from the lists.

There was reason for this precipitate withdrawal; the last thing Kalanthaka Kantar wished was to be present when Aniruddha Brahmaraayar arrived—for the Mudhanmandhiri had a disconcerting habit of putting forth a great many uncomfortable questions that had, in the Thalapathy’s opinion, no relevance whatsoever to issues on hand but more importantly, to which he was hard put to provide answers. In particular was he keen on avoiding a situation where Aniruddhar might, in his presence, wring permission from Sundara Chozhar about opening the treasure vault to release funds for those affected by the storm … how was he even to face his respected *thamaiyan*, in that case?

Despite the Chakravarthy awaiting him since that morning, the Chief Minister delayed a meeting until dusk … for even his stalwart heart was now shaken. All his carefully laid plans and intricately orchestrated arrangements were as dust in the wind, and he postponed his audience with the Emperor in the vain hope that there might still be news of Mandhakini—until Azhwarkkadiyaan arrived in the afternoon with a debilitating report that put paid to such hopes: he had followed *Oomai Rani* into the alley he guessed she had dived into, and onwards to Pazhuvettarayar’s palace, whereupon he had actually climbed over the *madhil* and into the garden—but before he could initiate a search, Kalanthaka Kantar’s men had surrounded him.
“I couldn’t reveal the truth, *Ayya*,” he admitted, uncharacteristically discomfited. “Which is why I had to use your name to secure

release.”

Of all the mansions and stately homes within this sprawling Thanjavur fort, Aniruddhar mused, more alarmed at this revelation than he cared to admit. *She had to break into the one over which I have no jurisdiction—where I cannot even instruct my men to conduct an official search … still, all is not lost: Periya Pazhuvettarayar’s absence might yet prove a blessing*. “I can post sentries all around the complex, not to mention alerting one of my spies within the palace itself, as well,” he transferred his train of thought into speech. “That wretched boat-girl, though—ah, the havoc she’s managed to wreak!”

“I’m not quite so sure she did, *Swami*,” Azhwarkkadiyaan interjected. “There’s no guarantee that *Oomai Rani* might have acceded to your wishes even otherwise; she might still have tried to effect an escape.”

“Despite all this tumult, I am not without hope that having come all this way, she will not leave this city without trying to seek an audience with the Chakravarthy at least once. We shall do all in our power, of course—but postponing our own meeting with the Emperor any longer would be reprehensible; you would do well to accompany me with that boat-girl. All the information about both princes must be revealed to the Chakravarthy—perhaps he will be convinced about the *ilango*’s survival should news come from the very woman who saved him from the sea …”

The unlikely trio consisting of Aniruddhar, Azhwarkkadiyaan and Poonguzhali then trooped towards the royal palace, at the entrance of which Ilaiya Piratti and Vanathi awaited them. The news that *Oomai Rani* had not yet been discovered raised Kundhavai’s agitation—an agitation that could not help but ratchet even further, like the Mudhanmandhiri’s, at the additional knowledge that it was the Pazhuvoor lord’s palace gardens she had broken into … and her heart lurched as she realized the consequences of this disastrous act.

“Isn’t there a secret passage out of Periya Pazhuvettarayar’s palace, *Ayya*? What if she’d chosen that route?”

Memories of Vandhiyathevan flashed through the Mudhanmandhiri’s mind. “Would discovering it be quite that easy, *Thaaye*? Not everyone can claim the patronage of the Goddess of Good Fortune, after all … still, I shall make arrangements to place sentries outside the fort as well,” he assured.

He left his disciple and the boat-girl in Ilaiya Piratti’s capable hands, proceeding towards the Chakravarthy’s chambers for a private audience, and duly paid obeisance to Sundara Chozhar and Vaanama Devi, even while launching suavely into an explanation for his tardiness: that he had been irrevocably detained by his efforts to receive and collate reports on the recent storm, and attempting reparations for the same. He went into them at some length which, likewise, went a good way towards soothing the Emperor’s ruffled sensibilities. “A blessing indeed that at least you were here in the *Dhanaadhikaari’*s absence … but what is this I hear about abducting some woman or the other from Kodikkarai? I could barely believe my ears when Kalanthaka Kantar brought me the news—hardly the sort of conduct I expect from your illustrious self, *Brahmaraayare*! Doubtless you had your reasons for such outrageous behaviour—reasons that I might have been apprised of beforehand, perhaps? Or have you too, in keeping with everyone else surrounding me, determined that this sick, ineffectual weakling is no longer worthy of being applied to? There is Kundhavai, revealing that Arulmozhi was not lost at sea after all, but is safe and sound in the Buddhist Viharam at Naagai—a report that confounds me: am I supposed to feel profound happiness, or profuse sorrow? Why, having reached shore, did he not come here right away? Why did no one take the trouble to inform me of his survival, and subsequent safekeeping? Strange, unusual happenings abound around me, Minister, and I am none the wiser; my *rajyam* undergoes tremendous upheaval and unheard-of occurrences, and I am all in the dark. In the face of all this, rather than bear life a moment more—” words seemed to choke

in the Chakravarthy's throat; tears gathered and trembled in his dimmed eyes.

"Pray—*pray* cease this train of thought, *Prabhu*," Aniruddhar, who had possessed himself in silence all this while out of deference, now interjected. "My friendship with your majesty spans forty years; never, not for a moment in all this time have I even contemplated anything that would spell your detriment—nor will I, in the future. Certain reports may have been kept from your noble self in a bid to save you needless annoyance—an offense, if offense indeed it be, for which I crave pardon," he begged, his voice ringing with contrition. "I shall offer explanations to all your enquiries at once, if only your gracious majesty may be at ease."

"My heart shall receive no ease in this birth, I fear, Mudhanmandhiri, and I harbour grave doubts about the next as well, considering the plots and schemes hatched against me by my own children and my beloved companion, my trusted Chief Minister—"
"Your majesty shall soon be privy to exact details of who conspires against your illustrious self and with whom—but pray absolve me of this sin, for I am no party to such a dastardly act. I hold the position of Mudhanmandhiri in name only—a position that I have offered more than once to Periya Pazhuvettarayar, which I shall surrender this very moment if it so pleases you—should you profess the slightest displeasure in me …"

"Indeed, yes, of course—you are all prepared to distance your noble selves from me at a moment's notice; I do believe that the only soul to stay by my side until my last breath, and share my bitter end shall be Malayaman's daughter here. Clearly, amidst the mountains of sin perpetrated, I must have done something, at least one thing good—hence my greatest fortune, the result of all my penances that I gained her as life-mate!"

These rueful words served only to reduce his consort, seated serenely by his side until then, to heaving sobs. She left the chamber at once for the next, tears streaming down her face.

“Every word you uttered just now regarding Malayaman’s scion, oh, king of kings, is nothing but the honest, unvarnished truth—and the children borne of her blessed highness, are no less in their devotion and deference to your majesty.”

“Would that I could believe you, for their royal highnesses care not in the slightest for my word, nor obey my slightest command, indulging instead in all sort of starts with neither my knowledge nor approval—and you are content to play along with their plots! Doubtless you have been privy to the news of Arulmozhi’s survival—but not for a moment did you consider telling me. Why?”

“Because, begging your royal pardon, *Prabhu*, I truly was far from certain of said report until yesterday; I could only be sure of the fact that the prince had likely come to no harm. After all, every single astrological prediction about the moment of his birth could hardly prove wrong.”

“Ah, there is no end to the trials and tribulations unleashed by the much-vaunted *jothida shasthram*; one of these days, I fully intend to banish its entire tribe of followers from my kingdom … aren’t their bombastic predictions the reason everyone is bending over backwards to set Arulmozhi on the *simmhasanam* even while I live—and aren’t you a party to their schemes as well?”

“Far from it, my liege; if anything, my instinct was to keep him from Chozha Nadu for a while—a sentiment that I specifically imparted to him when I visited Ilankai … in direct contradiction of which Pazhuvettarayar appears to have sent men to imprison him, the moment I turned away; a command that you seemingly endorsed as well. The report acquired wings and flew all over the kingdom; in consequence, the people are seething against the Pazhuvoor lords, claiming that the latter were responsible for forcing the prince aboard their ship, and thus drowning him—”

“Lies, lies, all of it—lies from start to finish, Mudhanmandhiri, for Parthibendra Pallavan revealed all: the prince was never even upon the Pazhuvettarayar ship; he travelled aboard the Pallava vessel and willfully jumped into the choppy seas, defying all of Parthibendran’s efforts to restrain him—dived in of his own volition, claiming to save someone from a burning ship. Now that I bend my thoughts, everything appears to be a giant conspiracy; a devious plot fabricated for my especial benefit—but what hurts most is the knowledge that my beloved Kundhavai was also a party to these nefarious schemes; Kundhavai, whom I believed would stand by my side, even if the entire world turned against me—to whom I divulged secrets, incidents that no father would share with his daughter …”
“Should the whole world declare that Ilaiya Piratti schemed against you, Oh Emperor of Emperors, I would still refuse to believe it—and likewise, must you. Doubtless, she had her reasons for preserving silence regarding certain issues. And as for the *ilango* diving into the ocean to save his friend—that certainly is no lie, for the boat-girl who rescued both prince and his companion and brought them ashore is in the very next room; one who was witness to all that transpired in Ilankai as well,” announced Aniruddhar. “May I call her, Sire?”

“Is that so indeed?” The Chakravarthy straightened, eagerness limning every line of his body. “Bring her in at once, Mudhanmandhiri—would she be the one you brought forcibly from Kodikkarai?”

“The woman who travelled here in the Pazhuvettarayar *pallakku* is certainly the one in the adjacent chamber,” Aniruddhar agreed, cautiously. “I shall have her in, right away.”

He clapped his hands, heralding the arrival of Poonguzhali and Azhwarkkadiyaan.

Chapter 31

Twilight Dream

Sundara Chozhar subjected Poonguzhali to a keen scrutiny. “I do not believe I have ever set eyes on this young woman,” he announced

finally. “But she does seem familiar, somehow—who is she, *Brahmaraayare*?”

“The daughter of Kodikkarai’s Thyaga Vidangar, named Poonguzhali.”

“Ah, no wonder then,” the Chakravarthy exclaimed. “Not to mention some resemblance to her aunt as well,” he continued, but mostly in a murmur. “Only a little, though; there are more differences between them than similarities …”

Some little of these comments, *sotto voce*, reached the ears of his subject faintly.

Poonguzhali had never seen the Emperor in person, until this moment—although she had certainly heard a great deal, especially of his phenomenal good looks that would put even Manmadhan, the God of Love, to shame. A reputation seemingly well-deserved of the father of Arulmozhi Varmar. Having visualized the Chakravarthy of Chozha Nadu and the progenitor of a genetically blessed clan in a certain way, reality, in the form of a frail figure ravaged by disease and ruined by distress, threw her for a loop.

Memories of her furious intention to take him to task over his outrageous behaviour to her aunt made her squirm. Fear, astonishment and embarrassment warred for supremacy within her heart—but it was stupefaction that won in the end; she simply stood in her place without even a thought of paying her respects, gaping at the man upon the sickbed.

“Does your father fare well, Woman?” asked the Chakravarthy.

His question shook Poonguzhali out of her stunned state, and brought her to the realization that she stood in the *sannithi*, the sacred presence of an Emperor who extended his royal sway over a landmass that stretched from Ilankai to the River Krishna—upon

which she dropped to the ground instantly in prostration, and rose with her hands folded in deference.

“She is capable of speech, isn’t she?” Sundara Chozhar asked of Aniruddhar. “Or is she a mute, like her aunt?” A prospect that clearly weighed on him, judging by the anguished grimace that twisted his face.

“Quite the opposite Sire—she is capable of the speech of nine women,” Aniruddhar assured. “Your presence has merely struck her dumb.”

“I certainly seem to have that effect on everyone; no one is able or willing to engage in conversation with me.” He focused his attention on Poonguzhali, to the exclusion of everyone else. “The Mudhanmandhiri informs me that you saved Prince Arulmozhi Varman from the seething sea; is that true?”

“Yes, *Prabhu*,” she answered, each word drawn out hesitantly. “If that be a crime—”

A crack of laughter burst forth from the Emperor—bleak, soulless mirth that echoed in terrifying waves, prickling the skin. “Would you listen to this girl, *Brahmaraayare*,” he turned to his friend. “*If it be a crime*, she says—*if it be a crime to save the prince from a watery grave* … as though I am a ghoul that relishes his death; a demon that hopes for my son’s demise with all his black heart—perhaps this is what she has been told about me, that I am a *ratchasan* … is that what my people think, Mudhanmandhiri? That I am a vengeful, fiendish character?”

“Good heavens, *Prabhu*; pray ignore the blathering of a girl clearly in the grip of nerves … Woman, the whole of Chozha Nadu owes you a debt of gratitude for having been the prince’s saviour, not to mention the heartfelt happiness of the Chakravarthy himself—which, I assure you, shall result in whatever reward you might choose,” Aniruddhar

poured oil on the troubled waters. “Now, remember that there is no need for worry or fear, and recount to his majesty all that happened!”

“I would rather she explained something first, however,” Sundara Chozhar interjected. “She claims to have saved the prince; how did she know that he was one? Had she seen him before?”

“Indeed, Sire; several times, when he boarded the ship to Ilankai with his men,” Poonguzhali responded. “He even addressed me as *Samudhra Kumari*, once.”

“Ah, finally—she seems to have recovered the faculty of speech,” remarked the Chozha Chakravarthy.

Then, prompted often by the Mudhanmandhiri’s strategic questions, she launched into her narrative: beginning with ferrying Vandhiyathevan to Ilankai, right up to escorting the prince to Naagai—describing everything and everyone, barring for one: Mandhakini, about whom not a single reference was made, in deference to Aniruddhar’s warning.

“There can be no adequate repayment for your services to the Chozha clan, Woman,” the Chakravarthy said, once her recital tapered to an end. “Certainly, no compensation can compare … but answer this, if you will: having brought the prince safe to shore, why did you not escort him here? Why take him all the way to Naagai?”

“Due to the terrible ague that plagued him Sire; his highness was barely conscious when we transported him there—which we did only because we’d learnt that the Buddhist *Viharam* possessed excellent physicians, who, we were sure would nurse him with every care. The prince’s perilous state of health meant that travel was possible only by boat; there was no way he could have withstood a journey upon a horse or other vehicles.”

“And what of Pazhuvettarayar, who was in Kodikkarai when all this transpired? Why was he not informed, pray?”

Poonguzhali hesitated for only a moment, before her characteristic courage reasserted itself. “The whole country is aware that he is the enemy of the prince, Sire,” her voice rang out right regally. “How could I possibly bring myself to surrender him to them, in that case?”

“Ah, indeed, yes—for surely it isn’t just the Pazhuvettarayars who nourish hatred against my sons but my own self? The world certainly appears to believe so … but be that as it may, last night’s storm would have ravaged Naagai even more, wouldn’t it? My heart is anguished at the thought of the prince subjected to further torment …”
“Chozha Nadu has always been the favoured child of good fortune, *Prabhu*; furthermore these are times of rarified cosmic providence, of extraordinary luck—”

“Chozha Nadu might indeed be the child of providence, *Ayya*, but I am hardly one; rather, I am borne of the most terrible fortunes … *Brahmaraayare*, I wish to see my sons one last time, before my eyes close forever—”

“*Ayya*, pray—*pray* do not give away to such sentiments: who but your gracious self, with such illustrious sons and a daughter, might claim to be more of fortune’s fair child?” rallied the Mudhanmandhiri. “I shall send men to escort the prince here this very day—with my disciple, Thirumalai, for added protection!”

It was only then that Azhwarkkadiyaan’s presence made itself felt upon the Chakravarthy’s consciousness. “Ah, so he has been here all this while?” he murmured. “He was the one Chinna Pazhuvettarayar referred to, wasn’t he? The man who climbed over the Pazhuvoor palace’s garden *madhil*?”

“He had perfectly valid reasons, *Prabhu*, which your noble majesty must permit us to reveal tomorrow, for you are already greatly fatigued.”

It was this moment that Malayaman's daughter, Kundhavai and Vanathi chose, to re-enter the Chakravarthy's chamber. "I must ask you to bring this day's audience to an end, Mudhanmandhiri; the physicians have issued strict instructions that the Emperor ought not to be over-taxed on any account," cautioned the Maharani. Then, she turned to Poonguzhali. "This young woman, I believe, possesses a sweet voice. She could sing a few *Thevaram pathigams*, I think; his majesty would derive a great deal of enjoyment."

"Very well, *Thaaye*; I shall request my disciple to participate as well —he has a flair for *Aazhwar paasurams*," offered Aniruddhar.

Poonguzhali obligingly launched into the melodious "*Kootraayinavaaru vilakka kileer* …" while Azhwarkkadiyaan chose a rendition of "*Thirukkanden, pon meni kanden* …"

Sundara Chozhar's eyes closed when the verses began; within moments, the wrinkles in his distraught face smoothed out; an expression of mingled tranquility and peace settled over his features. His laboured breathing evened to a steady rhythm; it was obvious that he had slipped into deep sleep.

Daylight was fading swiftly; twilight began to set in, heralded by the arrival of a *thaathi*, lamp in hand. The Chakravarthy's audience crept out of the room on silent feet with the exception of Vaanama Devi, who lingered by her husband's side for a few moments, before noticing her daughter upon the threshold. Kundhavai Devi gestured something, upon which her mother took the hint and left, as well.

Stillness descended upon the chamber; the only semblance of sound being the rise and fall of Sundara Chozhar's faint breathing.

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The utter exhaustion and weariness engendered by the previous tortured night's complete lack of sleep; the sweetness of the chaste Thamizh verses sung by Poonguzhali and Azhwarkkadiyaan … both

combined to immerse the Chakravarthy into slumber despite the night still being young—but all this notwithstanding, it could hardly be said to be the healing and peaceful rest untroubled by dreams; events past and present, both rooted in reality and rippling forth from imagination flitted through his subconscious, subjecting him to a veritable smorgasbord of bizarre experiences.

***

He and Poonguzhali were in a boat, sailing upon the deep blue sea. She was plying her oars, singing perfectly in tune with the ocean's sonorous rhythm.

Sorvu kollaadhe maname—unadhu
Aarvamellaam oru naal pooranam aagum
Kaarirul moodiya neeliravin pinnar
kaalai malardhalum kandanai anro
Dhaarani silirkkum, thaamarai sirikkum:
Alikkulam kalikkum; arunanum uthippaan!"

[*Anguish not, dear heart—your deepest desires shall be realized some day! For have you not seen that dawn breaks, after the darkest night? Know that soon, the earth shall thrill; the lotus smile, lives shall thrive—and the sun too shall shine!*]

The simple words and serene notes delighted Sundara Chozhar, whose heart felt lighter than air, the depression weighing upon him seemingly a thing of the past. "Go on—sing some more," he urged, enthusiasm rippling through his voice. "Go on—go on!"

The little craft bobbed endlessly upon the waves.

Abruptly, darkness dropped upon them like a stifling blanket; a furious gale began to blow. The sea, calm as plate glass only moments ago, began to heave and churn, tossing waves as massive as mountains; the boat, having drifted gently like a cradle was now being flung to the high heavens one moment, and the depths of the

underworld the next. The merciless wind ripped out the sails from the craft's masts—despite which the little craft still, somehow, managed not to surrender to the elements and upend completely, always righting itself at the last moment. A miracle owing solely to Poonguzhali's phenomenal rowing skills, Sundara Chozhar marveled, delighting in her dexterity.

The gale dropped just as suddenly as it had begun; the choppy seas quieted, the surface recovering its customary tranquility—while the eastern sky began to display unmistakable signs of *arunodhayam*, a glorious dawn. Within moments, a radiant sun rose over the horizon, his luminous rays touching the waters and transforming the ocean into molten gold. In the distance came into view verdant islands, their lush coconut groves resounding with the melodious notes, the *madhuradhvani* of teeming birds—islands, Sundara Chozhar recognized with a start, that were none other than those in the vicinity of Ilankai … including the one where he had met Mandhakini long, long ago, far removed from the present; in a previous birth.

"You managed to transport me straight to paradise in the end, did you?" He exulted. "How am I ever to thank you?"

Receiving no reply, he turned in her direction … only to freeze in a state of complete and utter stupefaction—for the woman seated on the other side of the boat was not Poonguzhali, but Mandhakini! And not an appropriately aged Mandhakini either, but one who was exactly as she had been, thirty years ago.

He stared at her in stunned astonishment for a few moments. "You—is it indeed you, Mandhakini? Was it you all this time, disguised as Poonguzhali?" He launched into flurried speech, before suddenly remembering that she could not hear a word. And yet, the woman smiled, as though perfectly aware of all he had said by simply reading his lips.

Sundara Chozhar tried to rise in an effort to approach her—only to fall back, defeated, as he recalled anew that his legs no longer

possessed the power to stand.

“I cannot come to you, for I have weakened into an invalid, Mandhakini; you must be the one to come to me … ah, never ever shall I leave your side, not even if I were promised to be made the undisputed emperor of all three worlds, crown and scepter to match! I see no need to approach any of these islands near Eezham; someone or the other shall barge in constantly, disrupting our idyll—row right to sea—let us row, row far, far away—row, row beyond all seven seas to an isolated isle at the edge of the world …!”

A smile blossomed upon Mandhakini’s face, as though she had understood every one of his impassioned words.

***

Upon the River Kaveri, in an ornately decorated boat designed like an exquisite *rajahamsam*, a regal swan, sailed Sundara Chozha Chakravarthy, his queen consort and children. A chosen band of choristers sang gloriously, and the Emperor closed his eyes in pleasure, giving himself completely up to the enjoyment of music, when …

… “*Ayyo*!”—“*Ayyo*!” Screams and anguished shrieks dragged him rudely out of his reverie; he opened his eyes to complete pandemonium. “Where is the child—where is Arulmozhi?” rose a babel of confused shouts.

Sundara Chozhar stared around him in alarm—to glimpse, at a little distance, his youngest born, his beloved child in the clutches of a woman—a woman who was even now thrusting him into the tumbling waters, trying to drown him …

Horror wound paralyzing tendrils into every corner of his body; he prepared to dive into the raging river to save his son—when he caught sight of the woman’s face. An evil face, a demonic face twisted into a grimace of malevolence … the face of Mandhakini.

His body lost what little strength it possessed; a limp rag drained of all semblance of life. Far from diving into the waters, he collapsed with a thud into the boat.

Perhaps it was the shock of falling, but he jerked out of both dream and deep slumber simultaneously, drenched in sweat despite the chill in the air due to the recent storm and rain. A great weight rolled off his heart, though, at the realization that all the terrifying images he had been bombarded by had been a part of a nightmare.

He stared across the room. There was no one there, save a lamp flickering in solitary state. *Doubtless, everyone is in the next chamber to allow me rest*, he mused, and was about to summon them with a clap of his hands, when …
… on second thought, perhaps it would be best to wait awhile. *Until the shock from wandering through that terrifying dreamscape has evaporated*, he explained to himself.

It was then that he heard some slight sound. Seemingly from the floor above.

What on earth could that be, he wondered, twisting his face just a little in the direction of the noise.

An indistinguishable figure seemed to have grabbed hold of one of the columns on the edge of the balcony above … and was climbing down.

Hidden Meanings and Explanations

“Within moments, a radiant sun rose over the horizon, his luminous rays touching the waters and transforming the ocean into molten gold …”

The lyrical words Kalki uses to describe this natural phenomenon are "*thagathagaa mayamaaga katchiyalithathu* …"—a quaint Thamizh usage that literally encapsulates the glitter and gleam of sun rays.

Chapter 32

“Why do you torment me?”

Sundara Chozhar stared at this extraordinary sight, stupefied. Who on earth could possibly be shinning down the massive column from the floor above—but more importantly, why?

All the confusing figures that had paraded through his horrifying nightmares now reared their fearsome heads: was this too, one of them? Had he not quite awoken, still trapped in the terrifying terrain of a dark dreamscape?

In a bid to rid himself of this suspicion, he closed his eyes tight again, waiting a whole minute before re-opening them—and fixing his gaze keenly in the direction of the figure, to see …

… nothing.

Nothing at all; no shadowy form swarming down pillars and creeping through floors; a mere figment of his over-wrought imagination, just as he had thought.

Trying to recollect all that had happened before he fell asleep, he mused that the Mudhanmandhiri, his devoted disciple and Thyaga Vidangar’s daughter—she of the melodious music—had likely retired once he slipped into slumber, while Malayaman’s daughter and her maids too, were probably in the next chamber.

He spent a few moments regretting, a little, the accusations he had poured to Aniruddhar against Kundhavai—ah, his daughter who had no equal in intellect; who wielded the incredible weapon of foresight

… and who had taken the wisest of decisions to prevent the kingdom from descending into chaos and confusion, by secreting the prince in Nagapattinam. A mistake indeed that he had taken offense at this reasonable resolution.

Not that he had not known of his propensity for hasty judgment; for at least a while now, Sundara Chozhar had been aware that neither his temper nor his perception was quite all there; what was the point of working up his annoyance against Ilaiya Piratti, then? Far better to follow her instincts; first upon the immediate agenda would be to arrange for Arulmozhi to come here … *good God, if only he has not been harmed by the recent storm—I must speak to Kundhavai at once*, he decided, and was about to call those in the room next door with a clap of his hands …

… but wait. What was—was someone at the head of his bed? The footsteps seemed almost noiseless, though, like those of silent, fleet-footed cats or tigers. Who could it possibly be? The Malayaman princess? His own daughter? One of the *thaathis*, perhaps? Were they tiptoeing cautiously for fear of disturbing him?

“Who is it?” The Chakravarthy’s voice was extremely low.

Silence.

“Who is there?” His voice rose a little. “Come forward, whoever it is!”

No answer this time either.
Abruptly, a suspicion darted through his mind—suspicion that kindled tendrils of mingled panic and confusion. Could it be—could it be her? Her spirit? *Having haunted my dreams until now, has that wretch, that kraathaki now transcended her own sphere and infiltrated mine? Isn’t it her practice to torment me with a supernatural appearance at midnight, decked out in dazzling jewelry and silks? Surely it is far too early; only twilight—or has the hour advanced and it actually **is** quite that late? Have I slept that long? Is that why Vaanamaa Devi and my daughter are no longer here? Nor the maids … ayyo, why have they*

left me all alone? That blasted karaiyar woman won't let me in peace until my heart is a seething, roiling sea of pain; until I lose all semblance of sanity and turn into a screaming maniac …!

If it really is you, unholy witch, come before me! Torture me in every single way you can, and then leave—instead of flitting about behind my bedstead, just out of sight! Why do you rip out my life inch by agonizing inch? Come before me! You crave a blood sacrifice, don't you? Come, now, come here, right now; you possess a trusty dagger; I know you do—hack me into pieces the way you do tigers and bears! Rend ***me*** *from limb to limb—but spare my children, I beg of you—don't punish them for my crimes! They weren't the ones who betrayed you—and come to think of it, neither did I … did I? Was I the one who demanded that you kill yourself by jumping off the lighthouse? Why do you torture me diving into a hell of your own making?*

Sundara Chozhar sensed a figure standing very close to his head, by the bed.

A shudder borne of sheer panic hurtled through his weak body; the intestines in his stomach coiled up to chest, and rose to his throat, choking his windpipe—and then right to his very eyes, threatening to gouge out his very eyeballs …

It was her.

It was her, standing right next to him, he knew without a doubt—her ghost, finally here, just as he had foreseen, as he had anticipated all these years, to demand a sacrifice in blood and flesh—it was going to plunge a dagger into his heart—or perhaps strangle him with its own bare hands? Who knew? As long as it could exact its bloodthirsty revenge … *it isn't as though I am any use to anyone alive; allowing her to wreak her vengeance on me might protect my children, wouldn't it?*

It occurred to him that if he craned his neck and peered up just a little, his eyes might be able to discern the ghostly form of

Mandhakini—so close was it; its shadow seemingly falling upon his face. Just one glimpse—one moment to flick up his eyes … but no, he simply did not possess the courage. *She may as well do whatever she wishes; I will not risk even a glance*, he decided, and screwed his eyes shut.

He stayed thus for a while, but nothing of what he had been expecting—and dreading—happened: neither a sharp dagger in his chest nor a pair of eerie, otherworldly hands around his neck. The shadowy figure—the one at the head of his bed—seemed to have moved away. *Aha, that karaiyar woman isn't going to leave me alone; there are years upon years yet of torture; aeons worth of torment left to inflict … she may have fled my sight today, but let me call for the others to return—if she is here still, the sight of newcomers in the chamber might drive her out for good*!

"Who is there?" Sundara Chozhar called out in a loud voice. "Where has everyone gone?" He opened his eyes upon the words and …

… wait, who was this, at the foot of the bed?
Her. It was *her*; the spirit of the mute—no doubt about it; there she stood, the ghost, her tresses blowing about wildly—droplets of blood dotting her forehead—likely proclaiming that she was here to exact a bloody vengeance …

Suddenly, all semblance of restraint vanished, not to mention the vice that seemed to grip his throat. "You wretched mute witch!" He screamed at the figure like one possessed, with all the power of his weak lungs. "You tormented me while you lived by not speaking a word—and you torture me again, now that you are dead! Reveal your purpose; tell me why you haunt me—if it is to avenge yourself, wreak a bloody havoc upon me, instead of just standing like a stock with your face the picture of woe! Or have you come to me for something in particular? Speak, in that case—or if you cannot, use signs but do not persecute me by just standing at a distance like a statue! Ah, why do your eyes glisten with unshed tears—*ayyayyo*, are you sobbing in sorrow? Good God, I cannot bear this sight—

reveal whatever it is that you wish to say, or else leave my sight … you will not go? Why not? What on *earth* have you planned to put me through, wretch? You did plunge my beloved boy—my youngest child—into the Kaveri to drown him ruthlessly, after all—a monstrous plot that failed only due to the grace of God, and will keep failing, the Lord willing! Ah, you blasted sinner, you foul wench—why do you keep staring at me as though your heart would break? Why are you still here—go—get away! You will not? You won't go? Well, I shall make you, I shall—I shall—"

He scrabbled around for whatever lay close to hand—which happened to be a *panchalokha akhal*, a lamp fashioned exquisitely out of a blend of five metals—and wrapped his trembling fingers around it. "Go, you ghoul—get lost!" He screamed, took aim in the direction of Mandhakini's "ghost"—and flung it in her face.

Little licks of flame leaping and circling, the lamp streaked across the chamber with the deadly force of Thirumaal's discus, the *Chakraayudham*, towards the shadowy form.

An eerie lament erupted from the throat of the feminine figure that Sundara Chozhar firmly believed to be an apparition—a moan of sheer, unadulterated emotion that seemed to echo from another world.

The Chakravarthy simply froze. The seven pulses that throbbed in his body seemed to have been utterly paralyzed; every cell, every muscle, bone, and even the very essence of soul-force within those bones appeared to have been reft of life.

The lamp, meanwhile, had missed the figure's face, clanging to the ground a little in front of her. *Danang*, *danang, danang* reverberated its metallic echo around the chamber, as it rolled at her feet.

The *akhal* thrown might have gone out, but the room was not extinguished of all illumination, thankfully, for there existed another lamp in a far corner of the room … and Sundara Chozhar, straining

weak eyes through its feeble light, divined that Mandhakini's "spirit" stayed exactly where it was. For a moment it stared at him, an expression of indescribable agony writ large on its face—then, after one last, lingering look full of unspeakable heartbreak, it turned, and took a step as though to leave.

And then, for the first time, a tiny seed of suspicion sprouted in Sundara Chozhar's mind: was this, in fact, Mandhakini's spirit? Or a completely human woman somehow surprisingly identical in every respect? Her twin, perhaps? Or could it be … could it possibly be, against all outrageous odds, *her*? In flesh and blood? Had she never died? *Have I been in error, all this while? Was it all a colossal mistake—and if this was indeed her … then what an atrocious act to have flung a lamp at her head! Her face, too, when that happened—the unbearable agony that had replaced the earlier misery—had she endured the depths of despair at his cruelty? Ah, now she takes a step back, as if to leave—scanning the chamber as though wondering which direction she must choose* …

"Are you the *karaiyar* woman named Mandhakini?" He snapped. "Or her spirit? A sibling with remarkable resemblance? Wait—do not go —at least reveal the truth before you do—"

Even as his ringing voice died away, a group of people thudded into the room. Malayaman's daughter; Kundhavai; Vanathi, Poonguzhali, the Mudhanmandhiri, his devoted disciple—all of them, Sundara Chozhar realized in an instant, had gathered.

"Stop her!" He yelled at once. "Stop her from getting away—ask her —ask her who she is—why is she here—ask her!" He screamed, almost at the end of his strength.

Everyone who had barged into the chamber stopped short, baffled beyond belief for a moment. As if Sundara Chozhar's anguished expression, twisted in the throes of a frenzied passion and the sheer terror in his voice were not enough, Mandhakini Devi's presence there, at that moment flung them into a very sea of amazement,

halting their sudden and haphazard progress in its tracks. Everyone stood stock still for the next few moments, unaware of what was to be done, stranded as they were in various states of stupefaction.

Characteristically, it was Mudhanmandhiri Aniruddhar who managed to regain equilibrium first, gauging and understanding the inception and implications of this most unusual situation to a nicety. “Your aunt, is she not, my girl?” He asked of Poonguzhali.

“Yes, *Ayya*.”

“Rather than stand in place like a petrified tree, Thirumalai, make haste and stop Mandhakini Devi from fleeing—the Chakravarthy’s command!”

For the first ever time in his fairly long and loyal, if rather devious life, Azhwarkkadiyaan defied his guru’s order. “Command me to bar the way of a gathering storm, rather, *Ayya*.”

But Poonguzhali, equally paralyzed, recovered her wits enough to suddenly bound towards her aunt and clutch her shoulders … a move that failed as Mandhakini shook off her grip and leapt away at a run.

Defy his master’s orders he might, but Azhwarkkadiyaan was not completely without a strategy: he darted forward, shut and bolted the door through which the Mudhanmandhiri and the rest had barged in—and planted himself in front, spreading out his hands so no one could open it.

Mandhakini stared and stared around, eyes wide and bewildered, not unlike a nervous gazelle trapped on all sides by hunters. Realizing that her way out was barred, she came to the conclusion that her only other option was to leave the way she had entered—an intention that telegraphed itself clearly to the others, through expressive eyes that flitted swiftly from the chamber to the upper floor.

“Get her—catch her!” Sundara Chozhar screamed. “Make sure she does not escape—not before she reveals the truth! Find out who she is here to punish—to take her revenge!”
Again Poonguzhali approached her aunt who stood bouncing on the balls of her feet, ready to leap away—but this time, instead of trying to stop her, she attempted to communicate with gestures … the substance of which Mandhakini seemed to understand, for she pointed to the *akhal* on the floor.

“*Appa*,” Kundhavai, who had been observing the exchange, turned to her father. “Was it you who threw the lamp at *periyamma*?”

“I did, Daughter—for I could not bear the way that ghoul stared at me …”

“Neither ghost, ghoul nor spirit, Father, but a woman of flesh and blood, a *maatharasi* who lives yet … *Periyamma* was never dead, *Appa*. Ask the Mudhanmandhiri, if you will; he knows everything.” Kundhavai bent her attention once more to Poonguzhali and Mandhakini engaged in a silent argument—and almost bounded towards them.

“Daughter, do not—do not approach her!” Sundara Chozhar panted, almost beside himself. “That *raatchasi* might do anything—” And he scrambled up in his bed in a desperate bid to rise.

The Malayaman princess chose to intervene at this moment, pressing gentle hands upon his heaving shoulders. “Pray be at peace, *Prabhu*,” she soothed, laying him back. “Your blessed daughter will come to absolutely no harm.”

Chapter 33

The Patron Deity of the Chozhas

Mandhakini stared hard for a second as Kundhavai approached her —whereupon the Chozha princess suddenly did something entirely unexpected: she fell before the older woman in complete prostration,

a *saashtaanga namaskaaram*, touching her hands to her feet in obeisance. *Oomai Rani*'s weathered eyes filled with tears; she bent, raised the princess and folded her in a warm embrace—upon which Ilaiya Piratti seized the opportunity to twine an arm around Mandhakini's own, linking hands almost to her shoulder, and dragged her to the Chakravarthy's sickbed.

It was only then, upon careful scrutiny at close quarters that the Chozha empress noticed the mute woman's face, and the blood dripping from her forehead. "Good God, was it you who threw the lamp at her, *Swami*?" She cried out, horrified. "*Ayyo*, what on earth have you done?"

"No—no I did not, upon my word!" Sundara Chozhar protested. "My lamp did not even strike her; blood was dripping from her forehead even as she arrived here—stay, though; she might blame me for it, the blasted wretch! And you might well believe her, for you are all on her side," he panted, almost beside himself. "Why, even *you* feel boundless pity for her, Malayaman princess … do you even know who she is?"

"Indeed I do, *Swami*; my patron deity—of the entire Chozha clan in fact, and the goddess who saved my beloved son from drowning in the Kaveri, is she not?"

"Ah, you believe so too, do you? Did Kundhavai tell you thus?"

"How could she have, when she was a mere child herself when all this occurred? No, I knew what I saw, and I merely stated what I knew … as this divine lady saved not just Arulmozhi's life but yours too, for all of Chozha Nadu's sake; did she not rescue your gracious self from becoming a bear's prey on Boodha Theevu?"

"Good God, you are aware of this as well—and what about the fact that she was far from dead, all these years? Did you know that too?"

“For some time now, yes—and ever since I did, I have been petitioning the Mudhanmandhiri to escort her, our Devi here, from the isles of Eezham …”

“Heavens, *Aniruddhare*—what on earth is this that the Maharani says? Is that wretch indeed the *karaiyar* woman? She is alive and well, then? Was her death a lie? And all those times when I believed her to be haunting me—were they all my delusions? My mind is in a ferment of chaos as it is,” he lamented. “Do not—do not you all reduce me to a completely senseless, raving lunatic!”

“True indeed that she is the *karaiyar* lady; equally true that reports of her death were, er, vastly exaggerated; she was alive, *Prabhu*,” Aniruddhar stepped in, uncharacteristically subdued. “It is a grievous sin that I have committed, Chakravarthy; there is no reprieve for a sinner such as I unless, by the grace and compassion of your illustrious majesty—”

“Ah, I understand now, Mudhanmandhiri: this is the woman you arranged to have abducted from Kodikkarai, is she not? You were lying when you said that it was the boat-girl who had arrived in the palanquin …”

“I crave thy pardon, most gracious and noble of monarchs; oh king of kings—”

“Hah, my pardon—you seek my forgiveness? Not in the entire history of time could a man, praised and raised to the skies as a gracious monarch and the king of kings, have been so utterly and completely deceived, tricked and betrayed! Surely this secrecy was unnecessary? Surly I could have been apprised of the truth? Why was I not informed, ages ago? Not even this evening, when you spent hours in a private audience did you stoop to reveal the truth … ah, I see it all, now; I understand everything: the Pazhuvettarayars have been right all along—you have indeed been conspiring against me, every single one of you …!”

“While it is true that we did engage in a conspiracy, it was certainly not against you, Sire. Our only intention, believe me, was to bring the *karaiyar* lady to you, somehow—a decision I made, based on the Maharani’s account of your anguish regarding her drowning … and her gracious majesty approved, I might add. Not that it was an easy task to bring the lady here—but I believed that that might be best, as you might not be convinced of her being alive, otherwise. I hoped to explain myself and my actions once she was in the city—an eventuality that almost translated into reality, until Mandhakini Devi reached the fortress gates last evening … and vanished into thin air; this young woman climbed into the *pallaku* in her place. All of today was spent in running our Devi to earth; my disciple jumped over the *madhil* and into the Pazhuvettarayar palace garden only after having seen her do so … to no avail; she could not be traced. All the Pazhuvoor men managed, instead, was to capture Azhwarkkadiyaan … I must beg the Chakravarthy’s indulgence in forgiving my disciple’s trespasses as well.”

“Hardly the only crime that requires my pardon; there must be score upon score more … and then? Proceed!”

“Well, to proceed … we could not find the good lady, despite waiting until this evening and even instituting a search within the Pazhuvoor palace. She was, in fact, the subject of our discussion in the room adjacent while you were asleep—where on earth could she have concealed herself but more importantly, how were we to intimate you of all this and through whom … when she found her own way to your *sannithi*, your presence, somehow. The fruit slipped and fell into the milk, as the saying goes!”

Sundara Chozhar’s gaze travelled in Mandhakini’s direction, then—where he noticed Kundhavai, Poonguzhali and the rest engaged in wiping away the blood on her forehead with a wet rag, anointing the injury with a blend of medicine and sandalwood paste. “Oh, Vidangar’s daughter,” he called out. “Would you ask your aunt how she came to be bruised, thus?”

“I did, *Prabhu*,” Poonguzhali took a couple of steps forward. “But …” she hesitated. “… I’m not sure *Athai*’s answer makes sense even to me.”

“Well, what on earth *does* she say? That it was a result of the lamp I threw?”

“Er, no, your majesty …” Poonguzhali’s voice trailed away as she made an effort to translate her confusion into something approaching sense. “She—she says that she got hurt when she butted into a mountain.”
Then, Sundara Chozhar indulged in the rarest of emotions—something no one had ever seen him do, in years: he broke into a merry peal of laughter.

Even as the others stared at him, flabbergasted, he chuckled again as he bethought himself the words, breaking into fits and gusts of mirth; in fact, he laughed so much that after a point, his audience began to stare at him in consternation.

“Well, Mudhanmandhiri? Why do you all gape at me so?” He demanded, still chortling, buffeted by waves of amusement. “In case you should entertain any doubts, no, I have not been seized by a new fit of insanity but merely the remnants of the old. As to why I am laughing now … surely you may guess? At this woman who blandly announces that she bruised herself upon a mountain—why, one cannot even find enough stones in Chozha Valanadu to make a small statue, not even to throw one upon the Chozha Chakravarthy’s head, let alone whole hills and peaks! And here she says that she bumped into one—which mountain, pray? Poonguzhali, ask her again, will you?”

Vanathi, who had stayed by the sidelines all this while suddenly brightened, as though illumined by a flash of insight; she took a couple of quick steps forward and folded her hands in deference. “*Ayya*, if I may be permitted to reveal something that just occurred to me—”

“Ah, I had not noticed—you are here as well are you, Daughter of the Velirs? In full possession of your faculties and not a crumpled, unconscious heap, considering the chaos and pandemonium that reigned here just now—consider me completely prostrate with amazement. And so? Proceed; what is it that you wish to tell me?” the Chakravarthy’s command rang out.

“About what our Devi here claimed, *Ayya*; that she had hurt herself walking into a mountain—and it occurred to me that …”

“Well? And what was it that did occur to you? Come now, you are a clever girl with your wits about you; doubtless, you have perceived the rationale behind her outrageous statement—go on, tell me! Did she bump into some hillock or the other on Eezham, sustain an injury and arrive straight here, perhaps?”

“Hardly *Ayya*. But—isn’t there a chamber of sculptures in the garden of this very palace? And doesn’t it possess a massive figurine of Raavanan holding aloft the mountain abode of Kailaasam?” Vanathi paused. “She could’ve bumped into that, couldn’t she?”

Her eminently reasonable statement plunged everyone into a sea of amazement. “She certainly could have!”—“She could have, indeed!”—“It must be, of course!” rang out excited voices as people traded comments.

“But what an absolutely intuitive explanation!” Kundhavai touched Vanathi’s forehead in a sweeping motion and cracked her fingers in the age old gesture of destroying the evil eye. “Ah, my dearest darling; how intelligent of you—to have divined the one detail that evaded us all!”

Poonguzhali, glaring at what was to her a distasteful byplay, turned to her aunt and communicated in a flurry of gestures. “Apparently, it *was* the mountain within the *sirpa mandapam*,” she conceded with ill

grace. “And if I had seen this so-called chamber, I’d have known of it too …” she muttered.

“Indeed, that must be so,” the Chakravarthy murmured, subjecting Mandhakini to a keen scrutiny. “Wandered about without knowing her way and likely walked right into the hillock within the *sirpa mandapam* … I wonder where she sought to go; what path she wished to take? And ended up here, instead?”

“There cannot be the slightest doubt that she sought to come here; that she wished to take the path that led to you,” Aniruddhar explained. “In fact, I mentioned as much to the others; that she would never leave the city without an audience with your majesty—”

“An unlikely possibility, Mudhanmandhiri, and one that I categorically refuse to believe, in any case; surely she would have found a way to meet me earlier, if so? At least once, in these twenty-five years? Why procrastinate all this while—and why taunt me as an apparition? Ah, yes, I did believe her to be a ghost—why not, pray, when she certainly roamed about the hills, dales, jungles and woodlands of Eezham all this while, while I … I spent my time languishing in the luxuries of a palatial residence, lost in indolence! The fruits of a crime-addled mind—how do I even explain its extraordinary grip and power? And how do I count the number of times my heart seized and churned in torment at what I believed to be her form? Perhaps she has visited me before as well, as she did today, in secret; who might know? And I believed her to be a spirit, a ghoul … twenty-five years—good God, twenty-five aeons!” The Chakravarthy, who had been speaking *sotto voce* all this time as though to himself, now abruptly turned to Aniruddhar. “Wait—did you not crave my pardon just a while ago, Mudhanmandhiri?” He demanded, mingled wrath and suspicion in his voice. “What was your crime, pray?”

“Your majesty, I must beg of you to consider … is it fair in the slightest to interrogate the offender about the offense?”

“Who else am I supposed to question, pray … wait, of course: I need ask no one, least of all you for it is writ large on your face: your report that she had fallen into the sea and drowned—a lie, was it not? An extraordinary lie that you perpetuated for the last twenty-five years; a lie that you willed strenuously into existence, and that I believed … ah, your crime is horrendous indeed, *Aniruddhare*!”

“Perhaps, Sire—but for which I cannot be held solely responsible; this scion of *karaiyars* here must bear her part as well, for while it is true that she fell into the sea, she experienced a *punar janmam*, a rebirth, so to speak … but not stopping with that, she asked for and received an oath that the secret of her survival must never be revealed to you. An oath which, if dishonoured, would result in her death, she swore. You need not take my word for all this, but may well ask her yourself—”

“I see no need to do so, however, for it might well be as you say—but surely I am not in error when I say that you did collectively conspire against me, all of you?” The Chakravarthy persisted.

“There can be no forgiveness for my crime and therefore, I seek none. However, one thing I can say with impunity, Sire—that the weight that crushed my heart for years together, has finally been lifted today. I must now beg your gracious majesty’s indulgence in bidding me farewell, for I wish to spend what few days I have left at the lotus feet of Sri Ranganathar, in His holy abode of Thiruvarangam …”

“Impossible, *Brahmaraayare*,” declared the Emperor. “Witness the unimaginable consequences of a crime you perpetrated years ago—surely your duty lies here and now, more than ever, ensuring a tidy resolution of the problems that beset us—before you rush to devote yourself at the feet of the illustrious Ranganathar?”

Chapter 34

The Extraordinary Perils of being Raavanan

“Kundhavai,” Sundara Chozhar turned to his beloved daughter. “There are affairs of state that I must discuss with the Mudhanmandhiri; repair elsewhere and see to your tasks. Your mother may stay here for a while, but …” he glanced quickly in the other direction. “… take *this* with you.”
This was a clear reference to Mandhakini—a word that equally clearly displayed the Chakravarthy’s revulsion for the lady.

Upon encountering Ilaiya Piratti’s rather disappointed expression, he continued. “Indeed, it might not be a bad idea to confirm that she did hurt herself upon the Kailasam in the *sirpa mandapam*; you would do well to take her there and make sure of it … for I cannot stand the sight of her, in truth.”

Intense dismay writ large on her charming face, Kundhavai took *Oomai Rani*’s hand and was on the brink of departure, when the Malayaman princess approached. “After all, Child, she does look a terrible fright, doesn’t she? What would be the point of ruing your father’s words?” she asked in gentle tones meant for her daughter alone. “If anything, here is an opportunity for your superior skills: why not showcase your talents for hairstyling and beautification with her?”

The smile that wreathed Kundhavai's countenance revealed her agreement with this plan; she departed with Mandhakini, Vanathi and Poonguzhali in tow.

Left behind were the Mudhanmandhiri and Malayaman's daughter, both of whom came under the Chakravarthy's rather severe scrutiny. "I know not what the two of you were thinking, engaging upon a task such as this," he remarked, his gaze flicking from one to the other in quick succession. "If it was your assumption that this would bring me joy—well, no offense could have been greater … what on earth were you about, *Aniruddhare*, dragging this barbaric brute all the way from Kodikkarai at such outrageous effort and expense? Pray divulge the truth at least now; do not attempt to keep anything from me anymore!"

"An offense that shall never be repeated, Sire," the Chief Minister assured, a wealth of overwhelmed emotion in his voice. "Never, ever shall I conceal—nor aid concealment of—anything from your gracious majesty, no matter how trivial or inconsequential, I swear. Even now, every endeavor I ever attempted, every massive *prayathanam* I made was to ensure that the truth was finally revealed … revealed as a result of my awareness that you believed a woman to have killed herself on your account. That, despite my belief that the incident had receded from your memory over time, it had, in fact, settled ever deeper in your consciousness. That you carried the pain and hurt in your heart; a pain that only increased manifold over the years. That you wailed and wept with grief even in sleep when you ought, by rights, to have been taking your ease … a sight that caused the Malayaman princess grievous pain; more than even what your gracious majesty suffered … and which prompted her, some time ago, to come to me for resolution. And that, Sire, was the reason for our engagement in this mission; we were convinced that if we could produce the lady you believed dead—if you could see her alive, in flesh and blood—you would be rid of this terrible web of self-flagellation you had spun around yourself," Aniruddhar

wound down with a sigh. “I beg your most compassionate majesty, to forgive my trespasses—if trespasses indeed they be …”

“Trespasses!” The Chakravarthy well-nigh exploded at this sober speech. “Trespasses—no, a crime, a grievous, unforgivable crime! She flitted around me as a horrifying ghoul all these years; haunted my soul as an appalling apparition even in my dreams—and now you produce her, a crazed lunatic instead of a sinister spirit! Did you truly believe that the sight of her would bring relief? No, not for a moment! Had you consulted me beforehand, I would have rejected this insane scheme out of hand … well, what is done is done, and cannot be undone; having moved heaven and earth to drag this mute lunatic all the way here, how and when do you propose to return her to her rightful place?”

Aniruddhar simply stood transfixed, speechless in the face of this immutable question—leaving Malayaman’s daughter to undertake the responsibility.

“I confess that I have no intention of sending away my sister, *Swami*,” the Chakravarthini’s tone was the very essence of serenity. “She shall reside in this palace, with me, and I shall consider her—nay, worship her—all my days as my very own elder sister, my *thamakkai*.”

“There really isn’t the slightest need to traverse such incredible lengths and engage in such a phenomenal *prayathanam* to establish your devotion to me, *Devi*,” the Chakravarthy commented wryly. “I have had twenty-five years to know you to be a very queen of chastity; that your virtue surpasses even that of the divine Kannaki; that, having set aside the welfare of even your beloved children, you have devoted yourself exclusively to my service, engaging in every fast and ritual known … there is hardly any need to prove yourself even more by dragging away a mute lunatic from the wild and establishing her in this palace. Hark, Daughter of Malayaman—and you too, Mudhanmandhiri: aeons ago, in some long forgotten age, when I found myself shipwrecked upon an island paradise devoid of

all human habitation and well-nigh forced into isolation, I did stumble upon this dumb fool, I admit—and entertained some little affection for her, which also I admit. That you jumped to all sorts of bizarre conclusions about eternal feelings of yearning on my part even now, based on this flimsy fact was a mistake too monumental to even comprehend! And as for the warmth I felt for her—well, many were the reasons, but twenty-five years have curdled what love I might have cherished into complete and utter hatred and loathing! Such is the suffering, the unbearable anguish I have endured at her hands, both awake and asleep; I cannot even stomach the idea of her presence in this palace! Send her away as soon as possible. I threw a lamp at her, believing her to be an apparition—had I been aware that she was a live woman of flesh and blood, who knows what I might have done?"

This venomous answer, delivered with an abundance of cruelty, the words literally spat out in barely controlled fury, shook both Aniruddhar and Vaanamaa Devi to their very souls. Not in a thousand lifetimes had they anticipated this reaction. At worst, the Mudhanmandhiri had merely expected to be chastised—and that, mildly—for past offenses; the Chakravarthini, while foreseeing a tranquil outward calm, had fully looked forward to an inward shower of well-deserved praise from an immensely gratified and delighted husband, wordlessly acknowledging her unlooked-for benevolence.

Instead, here he was, erupting in hateful speech—speech that not only served to incite a great deal of disappointment, but also repugnance and wrath. "And as for that mute loon being alive all these years—*chee*, what loss to the world would her death have been? Far, far better had she really been killed upon that ridiculous dive into the sea; if she had been dead and gone—which absolute and confounded idiot saw her and then went to all the trouble of saving her, pray?"

This peroration, almost a crowning glory to a monument of malice, finally accomplished the near-impossible: destroying what little reserve of patience the Chakravarthini possessed. "Pray—*pray* do

not give vent to such sentiments—you of all people, *Swami*!" burst out Malayaman's daughter, in a voice fairly throbbing with passion and feeling. "What a sin, a grievous sin indeed to nurse such ingratitude, as our elders admonish again and again! Even should you choose to ignore the way that *maatharasi* rescued you, how could you possibly forget that she saved our darling son Arulmozhi? And if you could, I certainly could not, and shall profess my thankfulness each day and every day, for fourteen births!"

"This tale all over again, *Devi*—" Sundara Chozhar began, only to be interrupted by his consort, who was beside herself with indignation.

"Not a tale, *Swami*, but the truth, as explained to me by Arulmozhi himself—that the goddess who saved him from the dangerous deluge of Kaveri was also the one who rescued him from unimaginable peril more than once in Eezham … ah, thank the heavens that he is safe and sound, in Naagai. Have him brought here, and question him yourself, if you please!"

"He might indeed be in Naagai, but who is to say that he is safe? What if last night's appalling storm should have landed him in grave peril? I find my heart churning with turmoil, Mudhanmandhiri; a nameless, faceless terror haunts my clan, I fear—some immense evil stalks their every waking hour … even the sudden arrival of that mute lunatic appears to be some sort of harbinger for danger …"

"It is anything but, *Swami*; the *karaiyar* lady's appearance is a marvelous sign of good fortune, for she is a protective talisman for our entire family, I believe. All my prayers, rituals and fasts have pleased Goddess Durga Parameswari enough to shower Her immense grace upon me in the form of this Devi …"

"Impossible; likely, it was not the benevolent Durga Parameswari but the malevolent Saneeswaran! Drive her out this instant—before you engage upon any other task … and if you will not, I shall be forced to do so, myself—"

“I beg of you, *Swami*—pray, *pray* grant me this one boon: that you will allow her to reside in this palace at least until Arulmozhi arrives,” pleaded the Chakravarthini in a voice overflowing with emotion—and not stopping with this, she fell at Sundara Chozhar’s feet.

“Hah, hear that, Mudhanmandhiri? Did you listen to that effusion of Malayaman’s beloved daughter, who clearly believes that all that is white must be milk? Good God in heaven, did you ever in your life see anyone quite so naïve, so innocent, devoid of wile and guile? Nothing, not a single request has she made of me all these years, only to finally beg this boon of all things—a boon that I cannot find it in myself to refuse. Not that this is going to ease my existence; no, every moment that dumb, insane idiot spends here shall burn me like the proverbial hellfire—which means that the prince ought to be brought here from Naagai as soon as possible!”

“Your wish is my command, Sire. Shall I employ an entourage of cavalry and elephants to escort his highness in full view of the public, or—”

“Have him disguised and brought here in secret? That is what you seek to ask, don’t you? For you do believe, if I am not wrong, that Chozha Nadu might erupt in chaos if he is exposed?”

“It isn’t a case of what I believe, *Prabhu*, rather than that I know it to be the absolute truth. The subjects are seething for a variety of reasons—and all it would take would be one, flimsy pretext … a spark to the oil-soaked tower of the people’s discontent, and it would explode into an inferno of catastrophe. I dare not even guess at the fate of the Pazhuvettarayars and Madhuranthakar—”
“This ominous prognosis of gloom and doom, Mudhanmandhiri—and if the people should collectively lose their minds in an outrageous exhibition of mutiny, what of that byword for courage and loyalty, the Chozha armies, the *veera sainyams*, pray?”

“Beg pardon, Sire, but it is amongst the *sainyams* that the greatest unrest and burning turmoil is to be found. The people, your majesty,

might indulge in nothing more than loud tirades and chaotic protests—but trained soldiers might well reduce the Thanjai fort to a smouldering ruin, thrust the Pazhuvoor lords and Madhuranthakar into prison—and will not rest until they have set He Who Won Eezham, that warrior of warriors, Arulmozhi Varman onto the lion throne …"

"An eventuality that you too hope might come to pass, in your heart of hearts, don't you, Mudhanmandhiri? Not to mention that gaggle of fools that are my subjects who believe all the claptrap spouted by harebrained astrologers, wandering about with their heads in the clouds … but one fact is the immutable, indestructible truth; one edict that is absolutely set in stone and therefore in your mind: my *periya paattanaar* Kandaradhitha *Adigal*'s son Madhuranthakan is the only rightful successor to the Chozha throne; it is my considered decision to crown him heir to the *samrajyam*. I care not if the people object—no, not even if all the Devas in their celestial abode and the *moovar*, the holy trinity, and as for my sons, if they stand in my way—"

"An eventuality that will never come to pass, *Swami*, for your sons shall never object to the slightest of your wishes. Arulmozhi, for one, has not even a tinge of kingly ambition in his veins; surely the prince who refused the throne of Ilankai isn't going to cross your noble self when it comes to that of Thanjai? And as for Karikalan … well, the only reason he accepted the responsibility of a crown prince was because you performed a *yuvaraja pattabishekam*. Must I even elaborate upon his incredible valour, his *veera paraakramam*? Does he not possess a stalwart heart and the steely will to establish an entire empire with his sword, should he so will it? He too, however, cherishes no desire whatsoever for this *samrajyam*, and one word from you would silence his meager expectations forever—"

"And that, I suppose, is the reason for his endless prevarication, the ridiculous dance he leads us all on, as an excuse to avoid visits? That that word might happen to fall on his unfortunate ears?"

“The crown prince has just finished erecting an incredible palace of gold in Kanchi, and even now awaits your illustrious presence, Chakravarthy.”

“And I know exactly why—so he may imprison us like the diabolic Kamsan of yore and then ascend the Chozha throne. Who knows if the palace he built is truly made of gold … or lac?”
“Oh, unjust!” the Chakravarthini cried out. “Unjust, *Swami*, that you should say such a thing of Karikalan—cruel!”

“So thoroughly have they poisoned the Chakravarthy’s heart,” put in the Mudhanmandhiri.

“It was no mysterious *they* but Karikalan himself who twisted my heart into an ugly, toxic mess. If he truly were a son of mine, why would he have stubbornly stayed away despite endless requests to visit?” Sundara Chozhar demanded.

“Surely there could be a host of other, extremely valid reasons?”

“One of which you could guess, I am sure, and elucidate in your inimitable style?”

“Word across the entire kingdom is that the Pazhuvettarayars will arrest Karikalan the moment he steps across the River Kollidam.”

“Someone certainly would seem to have well and truly corrupted my son—this lady’s father Thirukkovilur Malayaman, for one; Kodumbalur Velaan, for another … and perhaps you have sided with them as well? Making the duo a trio? I know not.”

“I have not the habit of talking behind peoples’ backs, *Swami*. Why, you mentioned the nameless terror surrounding your family just a few moments ago—that you sensed monstrous evil stalking them … and I must tell you now that your instincts are entirely accurate: grievous peril does haunt the Chozha clan, a peril that has launched

a two-pronged attack, in the form of two different conspiracies. The Pazhuvettarayars and Sambuvaraiyars—”

“Stop—cease your diatribe, Mudhanmandhiri *Aniruddhare*! The Pazhuvoor clan has served us tirelessly for an hundred years … and Periya Pazhuvettarayar, a warrior among warriors who sports sixty-four scars, badges of valour from twenty-four hard-ought battles is the man you accuse of conspiring against the Chozhas! Rather argue that the sun has winked out of existence, or that the ocean has burst into flames … statements that I might actually believe.”

“As to that, Chakravarthy, the celestial radiance of the sun is often dimmed by an eclipse, while the mythical phenomenon of Vadavamukagni, a legendary inferno in the North is said to burn up the very oceans … but it was never my intention to allege the Pazhuvettarayars of betraying the Chozha dynasty; rather only that they strive, tooth and nail, to crown Madhuranthakar heir to the throne—”

“And why would it be a crime, pray, to set the beloved son of the devout Kandaradhithar, illustrious *sivabhakthar* upon the *simmasanam*?” The Chakravarthy demanded. “After all, does he not possess that divine right?”

“A sentiment I entirely concur with—and since your majesty has, of your own will graciously agreed to offer him the bejewelled Chozha crown, there can be no possible room for outrageous allegations against the Pazhuvettarayars, who merely seek to fulfill your desire to the utmost of their considerable capabilities ...”

“ … thereby becoming even more deserving of my endless gratitude …”

“… while also indulging, if your majesty will permit me to say, in certain other activities that definitely do not carry your blessings—such as contemplating a partition of the empire, apportioning the region south of the Kaveri to Madhuranthakar and the north to

Karikalar; negotiations for which are said to be taking place this very day in Sambuvaraiyar's palace … negotiations, Chakravarthy, that threaten to undermine the very foundations, that splinter into pieces a *samrajyam* stretching from Eezham to the Godavari, painstakingly established and stabilized over a hundred years with the blood and sweat of your ancestors, the inimitable Vijayalaya Chozhar, Aditha Chozhar and Maha Paranthakar! Is this to be borne, Sire—will you stand by and let such a travesty come to pass?"

"Never, Mudhanmandhiri, not now, not ever will I ever allow any such mockery of this *mahasamrajyam*; rather, I shall demand that they hack my body into two before they even attempt any such thing—not that I could ever believe that Pazhuvettarayar might be a party to such a despicable act; perhaps he believed that it might please me—that I might wish to bestow at least half the kingdom upon my son? He would discard the scheme in an instant, however, if he were aware of how abhorrent I find it. Mudhanmandhiri, it is my resolve to crown Madhuranthakan the Chakravarthy of a Chozha *samrajyam* that has lost not an inch in dimension and I care not who objects: my own sons or even the Pazhuvettarayars!"

"There need be no concern about the latter's objections, if any, Chakravarthy, while the former will raise none—but these are not what stand in the way of Madhuranthakar ascending the throne; no, there exists a very real, immense barrier, one that soars to a far more impressive height, and from a source well-nigh irreproachable; a divine lady worshipped by you, me and all of Chozha Nadu. Why, I broached the subject to her as recent as a few days ago—"

"You refer to Sembian Maadevi, of course, whose mind too, has been corrupted by various unsavoury sources for a certainty, as she evidently believes that I wish to pass on the empire to my sons. Make arrangements to escort her here as soon as may be, Mudhanmandhiri, and I shall undertake to change her sentiments."

"A far from easy task, Sire, considering that it was Saint Kandaradhithar's own last command that his *dharmapathini* insists

on fulfilling; I heard his words myself, on the brink of his passing. Your *periya paattanaar* was quite clear that *Madhuranthakan ought not to be crowned king for an extremely important reason, and my wife knows it*."

"Is there indeed such a barrier? And would you happen to know what it is?"

"If so, would I tarry until you questioned me, *Swami*? I am afraid that is a petition to be made of Periya Piratti herself."

"Indeed, that is the one thing that concerns me extremely. Arrange for her to be here at once, and I shall ensure that this unfathomable barrier, whatever it might be, is brought down and resolved … now, who shall be our envoy? Why not Kundhavai herself? *Devi*," Sundara Chozhar turned to his consort. "Send for her at once!"

Vaanamaa Devi may have been present in the chamber and even listening to the conversation between Chakravarthy and Chief Minister—but with only one ear, since most of her attention was still irrevocable focused, to the exclusion of almost everything else, on the recently departed *Oomai Rani*, which meant that she left for the *anthappuram* the moment she heard her husband ...
… where she found Kundhavai, Vanathi and Poonguzhali mired in considerable consternation, the reason for which was revealed at once: Mandhakini was missing and a quick, apprehensive question brought forth an answer from the Chozha princess.

"Carrying out your request wasn't the easiest of tasks, *Amma*, but we tried our best anyway. We managed to have her bathed and into new clothes. Vanathi was combing and dressing her hair, while Poonguzhali sat nearby, stringing garlands. Even as I was intent on choosing several pieces of jewelry, I heard her cry out—and when I turned, Mandhakini Devi had vanished! Apparently, she had barely waited until her tresses were bound, before straining from her hold and taking off at a sprint! We're still desperately searching for her, as

she isn't to be found in any of the rooms nearby," she finished, woebegone.

Vaanamaa Devi's face was wreathed in a knowing smile—a fact that did not fail to perplex her confounded audience. "Was there a mirror in front of her, when your session was in full swing?"
"At a little distance, yes," Vanathi admitted.

"Likely, she happened to catch sight of her beautified figure in the reflection—and was seized by bashfulness; she could not help but dart away and hide herself. Hunt more carefully; she may have concealed herself in the *anthappuram* gardens … after all, activities such as leaping over *madhil* walls and jumping through *palagani* windows are a matter of habit to her, are they not?"
The entire cavalcade trooped into the *nandhavanam*—only to find it, after a dedicated search, devoid of their quarry. By now, their collective anxiety had escalated considerably, and all were wondering if the situation was serious enough to warrant informing the Mudhanmandhiri and Sundara Chozhar, when …

… from somewhere echoed a loud series of clangs: *Danaar*! *Danaar*!

The sound of a chisel banging on stone, in fact—and everyone's ears pricked up, trying to trace its origins.

It came from the *sirpa mandapam*, of course. Instructing a *thaathi* to come thither with a lamp, they filed into the chamber of sculptures … to witness a truly startling sight.

Mandhakini—now dressed, after a fashion, even if the process was still short of completion—stood at a little distance, heaving a long-handled hammer … and slamming, again and again, at the muscled arms of Ravaneswaran, holding aloft the Kailasam.

A figure of extreme durability and considerable strength, it was not an easy task to put a dent in the stone, and the lord of Lanka had not budged an inch, thus far—but there was no guarantee that this state

of affairs would continue, nor his safety assured; grave peril lay in wait, with every approaching moment. The crumbling of even two or three of the king's hands would result in the entire mountain collapsing upon him—and the wholesale disintegration of his several heads!

It was at this critical juncture that Kundhavai and the rest entered the *mandapam*. Mandhakini dropped the hammer the moment she set eyes on the newcomers, gazing at them with a beatific smile on her face.

The reactions of the rest, barring Poonguzhali, on encountering the bizarre tableau, however, were more or less the same: *the woman **is** a lunatic*, ran the thought through their heads. *Small wonder that the Chakravarthy feels such revulsion at the very sight of her!*

"Ladies," Malayaman's daughter looked around, including everyone in her comprehensive glance. "We would do well not to introduce or elaborate upon this incident in the emperor's presence," she cautioned.

Hidden Meanings and Explanations

Adigal

An extremely respective term of address for spiritually evolved beings.

Kamsan

The vindictive brother of Devaki, and therefore Lord Krishna's uncle. When the latter was born, an uncanny prophesy foretold Kamsan's death at the hands of his nephew, which set the older man on an unbelievable path of self-destruction—one that began with the destruction of others, of course. In fact, we have made Kamsan's acquaintance before, in this story—when Vandhiyathevan first enters

the city of Pazhaiyarai, dons a disguise and seeks an audience with Kundhavai Devi.

Palace of Lac

An episode of infamy in the Mahabharatham, wherein the Kaurava prince Duryodhanan offered an olive branch to his cousins, the Pandava princes by establishing them in a magnificent mansion … only for the learned Vidhurar (a minister and well-wisher) to reveal that said mansion was in fact, made of lac, an extremely flammable substance, which could be set on fire, killing the Pandavas within. How the sons of Pandu later escaped and went on to wage the Kurukshethram War is, of course, another epic altogether.

Chapter 35

Wrath of an Emperor

Even as the royal ladies discovered Mandhakini Devi within the *sirpa mandapam*, a furious argument was raging between Chakravarthy and Chief Minister.

“Oh God amongst kings,” began Aniruddhar, as soon as Malayaman’s daughter departed. “I refrained from initiating a discussion on certain topics, wary as I was in the presence of ladies —but I am left with no choice but to do so, now. Veera Pandiyan’s *Abathudhavis* range about the country in complete secrecy even as we speak, seeking and anticipating an opportunity to fulfill their vicious, terrible pledge of revenge.”

“Hardly an earth-shattering revelation, for I have known it these many years,” Sundara Chozhar’s dry voice held a wealth of sarcasm. “Every strategy the Pazhuvettarayars have employed towards my security has been rooted in this rationale above all, has it not?”

“Well may you be aware of the *Abathudhavis* and their heinous schemes, Sire—but not, however, that these loathsome assassins are being funded by gold and coins from the Chozha treasury.”

“Ah, now, what sort of fairy tale is this?” The Chakravarthy demanded.

“Rather a tame one, compared to the incredible fables that I am about to reveal. Here is my disciple Thirumalai, who saw pile upon dazzling pile of newly minted gold coins straight from Periya Pazhuvettarayar’s subterranean vault, in the midst of those conspirators … a scene which, if your majesty will permit, he shall describe—”

“Entirely unnecessary, for I shall not believe a word against the Pazhuvoor clan that has sacrificed generation after generation in Chozha service! Not even honest Raja Harichandran could convince me that those who shed blood for my cause, now invade my own treasury to fund my assassination—”

“Forgive me, Sire, for it was not that I sought to implicate the Pazhuvettarayars in this treachery; rather, to draw attention to the fact that our gold might well reach traitors without their knowledge.”

“Impossible; surely a soul cannot depart the body without Yaman’s awareness?”

“Not entirely outside the realm of possibility, *Prabhu*—especially if the God of Death had lately entered the state of matrimony with a mere maiden …”

“An act at his age that did not win my approval either in truth, and I communicated my sentiments to him in person—but I can neither allow nor allege his marriage as a crime of betrayal—”

“Once again, your majesty, it is not against Pazhuvettarayar that I levy these allegations, but upon the woman he has married—the Ilaiya Rani.”

“It is one thing to hint treachery at a man’s actions, but to heap these outrageous accusations upon an unfortunate, defenseless woman—disgusting, repulsive and loathsome.”
“And yet, my liege, no matter how repugnant, there are a few truths about the young queen of Pazhuvoor that I must and shall expose. Bearing in mind the soul-crushing consequences of concealing the truth of events that transpired years ago, and being the recipient of your fury just now for failing to reveal it at the right time, I crave your majesty’s indulgence and patience while I embark upon my mission.”

At this rather canny speech, a wry smile appeared upon the Chakravarthy’s withered countenance, dredged almost despite himself from the recesses of ill-humour. “You seek to trap me with my own words, do you?” He murmured. “Not to mention that said consequences were in relation to my personal affairs … be that as it may, proceed; I shall lend my ears.”

“Ilaiya Rani Nandhini Devi first stepped into the magnificent palace of Pazhuvoor three years ago. Ever since, several *mandiravadhis* have been in and out of the complex on a frequent basis—a fact not unknown to Chinna Pazhuvettarayar. He does not like these developments either, but—lacking the courage to confront his elder brother—prefers to preserve his silence.”

“The very epitome of brotherly relationship, I must admit.”

“But such extraordinary brotherly loyalty must not spell doom to the *rajyam*, surely?”

“And what sort of doom has been spelt, pray? Surely the *rajyam*’s fate is not hanging in the balance as the result of a few spells cast by a gaggle of magicians called by a naïve maiden? Are you honestly

accusing the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani of inflicting illness by weaving a host of hexes upon my person?”

“The men who visit the lady are not, in truth, magicians, my liege; I suspect that they are conspirators in disguise, and that our treasury is steadily being emptied through their wily schemes.”

“You may suspect anyone and everything, but is there an iota of proof?”

“A thorough investigation of Periya Pazhuvettarayar’s palace and its subterranean treasure vault this very day might yield some, oh king of kings.”

“The most loathsome of proposals to have ever been submitted before me, thus far. You have been my friend alone all these years, *Aniruddhare*—but the Pazhuvoor lord has clasped not just mine, but the hands of Chozha Emperors belonging to three previous generations, in the most intimate of friendships. He has shielded them as an armour of iron during the most testing of times; brandished himself as the gloriously terrifying *Vajrayudham*, Indran’s celestial weapon, before our enemies. To search his palace in his absence … good God, to believe that he harbours devious schemers! As well might I believe that Malayaman’s daughter has been feeding me poison in the guise of medicine—”

“I neither insinuate Pazhuvettarayar’s involvement nor even incriminate him in furthering a conspiracy; in fact, if anything, I highly doubt if his eyes, now permanently clouded by lust, are even capable of distinguishing plots hatched under his very nose. What I do imply is that his home appears to be the headquarters of heinous plotters planning Chozha downfall—and there is room to believe that the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani is part and parcel of this despicable crew.”

“Pray, continue. What comes next in your contemptible list of slurs against this naïve young woman?”

“A rather unusual coronation ceremony occurred at midnight a few days ago, near the memorial to Prithvipathi in the forest of Thiruppurambiyam. A little boy not more than five years old was thrust upon a throne and crowned the Pandiya king by a band of malevolent connivers, who also pledge themselves to the cause of annihilating the entirety of the Chozha dynasty without a trace.”

“I am unsure of what you hope to accomplish by revealing this news, Mudhanmandhiri. Did you expect me to flail about at these developments, my arms and legs atremble?”

“No, my liege; not at all, for I consider it nothing but a ridiculous charade—but I did wish to bring it to your notice that the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani was in the midst of this iniquitous group of conspirators.”

“And who might be the enlightened soul who witnessed these enlivening sights and gave you a complete and unadulterated report? Not your beloved disciple standing over there, surely?”

“He managed to put in an appearance once the entire performance was over and done with. No, the one true witness was Vandhiyathevan of the Vaanar clan.”

“Why—the spy who sneaked in here just once, before taking to his heels in a tearing hurry?”

“Hardly a spy, *Prabhu*, but your blessed son Aditha Karikalar’s trustworthy friend.”

“Of which there are many—too many to count, in fact—and each spouts as much nonsense as the other, none of which can be corroborated. And so? He may well have been accurate in his description, but there is nothing that can be done about it now. Neither Periya Pazhuvettarayar nor his Ilaiya Rani is here at the moment; interrogations, if any, may be undertaken when they have returned … but the more you speak of her, Mudhanmandhiri, the more my ever increasing desire to meet this wondrous young queen!

So repulsive did I find the entire wedding that I forbade her from ever being brought into my presence—a decision that, perhaps sowed the seeds of estrangement between us? Fostered an implacable anger? Which I will placate completely, of course, by issuing a royal invitation to him and his wife once the Pazhuvoor lord returns—"

"A sentiment with which I wholeheartedly concur—and when it comes to Nandhini Devi, for far more significant reasons; your majesty must graciously permit Eezham's Rani to remain in the palace until the Ilaiya Rani arrives …"

"Ah, you have crowned her queen of Ilankai, have you? Be that as it may, how are she and the Pazhuvoor queen connected?"

"A conundrum that is yet to be resolved, *Prabhu*—a mystery the resolution of which might, quite possibly, lie in their meeting—and that might finally lead to the renunciation of Nandhini Devi's relentless hatred for the Chozhas."

"I find it frankly astonishing that a woman's venom should concern you quite this much."

"I have excellent reasons, my liege—reasons that I, frankly, wonder if it would be right to reveal—even hesitate, I should say."

"Who else but you could do so, pray?" The Chakravarthy urged. "Renounce your reluctance, and reveal all."
The Mudhanmandhiri sank into thought for a few moments, before finally clearing his throat, as though having made up his mind. "The subject I am about to speak of, oh king of kings, cannot but be the cause of considerable unease to your gracious self, for it is a matter of excessive complexity, and I crave your majesty's indulgence in listening to my account. Now, those who have seen both Nandhini Devi and Mandhakini Devi cannot but remark on the remarkable similarity of their features—"

“Not exactly an unnatural phenomenon; trees are often alike—shocking, I know—and so, one lunatic closely resembles another, I presume.”

“Undoubtedly. But trees do not impersonate each other; neither does one lunatic parade about the palace as another’s apparition—and subject the Emperor to a merciless haunting.”

“What is this that you say, Mudhanmandhiri?”

“You suffered endless anguish, Sire, convinced as you were that Mandhakini Devi’s ghost flitted about your chambers every night …”

“Is it your argument that it was not her spirit, but her own self?”

“Neither, Sire—for I say that it was the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani, disguised as Mandhakini’s ghost.”

This startling revelation was productive of a moment of stunned silence … and then, Sundara Chozhar abruptly straightened, possessed by a raging fury that exploded without warning. “If what you say turns out to be the truth, I shall seize that demon’s throat and strangle her with my own …” he began, teeth clenched, when—

“No, Sire—pray, do not—do not utter such curses—not you, my liege!” Aniruddhar cut in, agitation colouring every word.

“Why mustn’t I?” The Chakravarthy seethed. “Why this cloying compassion for one who tormented me for ages without relief, beyond belief? Why shouldn’t she endure punishment?”

“No matter what her crime; no matter her motivations … if the one who levied such torture happened to be intimately connected to your noble self—if she were your own daughter …” the Chief Minister’s usually confident voice faltered, trailing away into silence.

“Good God, Mudhanmandhiri—what on earth is this farrago of nonsense?”

“It appears that I have indeed tested your patience beyond all mortal endurance; you may chastise me however you choose, but pray, *pray* speak no longer of punishing Nandhini Devi—for she is not just *Dhanaadhikaari* Pazhuvettarayar’s young queen but also the beloved daughter of Sundara Chozhar, Emperor of The Three Worlds!” Aniruddha Brahmaraayar announced in ringing tones.

The Chakravarthy simply stared at his Chief Minister for a few moments, stupefied into silence at this second, even more remarkable revelation—and then did something entirely unexpected: *galeer*!—he broke into a peal of merry laughter.

“The most auspicious of days, Sire, for I have heard your gracious majesty laugh twice.” The Mudhanmandhiri said, solicitously.
“And well you may, for until now, I believed this palace to be playing host to just one lunatic—but you would appear to have bested her,” Sundara Chozhar chuckled in fits and bursts, as though tickled every second moment. “She might be a loon bereft of speech and hearing—but you certainly are one, spouting drivel beyond bearing!”

Chapter 36

The Wee Hours

The royal ladies trooped into Sundara Chozhar's bedchamber even as the merry notes of his laughter pealed out: the Maharani first, followed by Mandhakini, flanked on either side by Kundhavai and Vanathi, almost dragging along the mute woman while Poonguzhali and a *thaathi* brought up the rear of this bizarre procession. The Chakravarthy's mirth had clearly lifted their spirits; Mandhakini's expressive eyes kept rising to stare at him for a moment before swiftly dropping to the ground the next.

The process of her beautification, it seemed, was finally complete. Those were the halcyon days when Kundhavai's talent for styling and adornment were beyond compare, earning her a reputation that literally spanned the length and breadth of the *samrajyam*; kings and vassals of lesser territories regularly sent their royal daughters to Pazhaiyarai, for the very purpose of being trained in these dainty arts—and true to form, Ilaiya Piratti had exhibited considerable verve and skill in the transformation of *Oomai Rani*. Prompted by some indistinguishable urge, she had dressed her tresses into the fashionable Andal Knot to one side of her head … and the ladies, setting eyes on her when the styling was done, were struck dumb by her stunning resemblance to Nandhini Devi. Her advancing years notwithstanding, a lifetime spent in harsh jungle had toughened an already lithe frame, erasing the nearly twenty-five year age gap between them. The surrounding royal ladies escorted her to the Emperor with not inconsiderable pride—each for a reason of her own.

It was a fairly well-entrenched custom during the time of this saga, for emperors and chieftains alike to enter the state of matrimony with more than one woman—even a whole host of them, on occasion. Wars exploded on an alarmingly frequent basis; princes were often at the forefront of battle—which meant that warriors wed a succession of women to ensure their own succession; the very preservation of their blood. The chief consort, the *pattamakishi* was thus expected to welcome and ensure the continued happiness of her sister-wives without the slightest hint of jealousy; it was considered the very epitome of virtue to nurture her relationships

with them in an environment devoid of resentment or one-upmanship. Small surprise, then, that Malayaman's daughter felt a justifiable sense of righteousness. Her daughter Kundhavai walked in a cloud of benevolent self-satisfaction, for had she not turned a lunatic, wild woman of the forest into a seemingly sophisticated young lady of incomparable beauty? Poonguzhali, for her part was exultant at the phenomenal royal reception accorded to her hitherto problematic aunt in the palace, for were these privileged ladies not falling all over themselves to welcome her?

The moment the Chakravarthy set eyes, however, on this parade of proud women entering the bed chamber, beaming bright and the picture of enthusiasm, the smile dropped off his face—for Mandhakini's transformation had the effect of submerging him in a veritable sea of stupefaction; such was her altered appearance. In fact, so stunned was he at this unbelievable tableau that he covered his eyes with his palm for a few moments, before staring and staring hard at her, wondering if the vision in front of him was real.

The details Aniruddhar mentioned a while ago had made a deep impression, and he could not help but engage in a mental comparison between the figure that had haunted him every midnight, and Mandhakini who now stood before him, registering a great many striking similarities … while also noting that some differences did, also, exist. *Here is a mystery indeed*, he murmured to himself, conscious of a suddenly burgeoning desire to unravel its tantalizing threads and like others before him, glean the truth. His repugnance for her aside—and it had not lessened one jot, beautification notwithstanding—he resolved that he would make the attempt to conceal it for the moment.

"I branded you a lunatic just moments ago," he informed Aniruddhar, as he swiveled to speak to his chief minister. "But it occurs to me that I am the one truly afflicted by all sorts of delusions and mental illnesses … clearly, I need daily visits henceforth not just from physicians but magicians as well! In fact …" this, *sotto voce*. "the one

currently employed by the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani would not be a terrible choice …"

Aniruddhar was conscious of a prick of unease at this flippant remark. *May none of those malevolent mandhiravadhis ever come next or nigh the emperor*, he murmured a quick prayer to himself. Aloud, he declared. "Surely there is no need of either *mandhirams* or magicians, oh king of kings, before the all-mighty power of Sriman Narayanan's divine name?"

"*Appa*, did you call for me?" Kundhavai interjected at this point. "Were you considering a journey to Pazhaiyarai? May we all accompany you?"

Choosing not to answer, Sundara Chozhar turned, instead, to Aniruddhar. "I believe I have experienced a change of sentiment," he informed. "These ladies are all gripped with enthusiasm for some strange reason, as though ecstatic at the arrival of a new daughter-in-law, and far be it from me to destroy their newfound bond. As you suggested, they shall enjoy each other's companionship for a while longer—and as you command a great deal of Sembian Maadevi's respect and reverence, you shall be my personal envoy and escort to Thanjavur, while you dispatch your disciple to Nagappattinam. Meanwhile, I shall personally undertake to make immediate arrangements through Chinna Pazhuvettarayar to bring forth his elder brother and the Ilaiya Rani at once!"

"Your slightest wish is my command, Sire—but it may take a few days for all the concerned parties to gather, for every river in the kingdom has broken its banks on account of the deluge from last night's rainstorm—"

"It matters not; considering the delay of endless years, a few more days are unlikely to cause concern or cost sleep; surely we can possess ourselves in patience? And if it should be arranged for Karikalan to be here as well, every issue may be resolved to satisfaction. Of course, should he refuse, I shall have to go to him—

but of that, later. You may leave tomorrow and escort Periya Piratti by hook or crook—and bend your considerable faculties towards flood relief efforts on your way," instructed the Chakravarthy. "It would seem that we have committed the cardinal error of forgetting the subjects' travails, immersed in our own—"

"No, *Prabhu*; not at all—not for a moment did I forget the reparations owed to the people; all the requisite arrangements shall and will be made as a matter of course. Your majesty may rest easy," assured the Mudhanmandhiri, before taking his leave.

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That night, for the first time in many nights, Sundara Chozhar was truly conscious of a wellspring of relief, deep within his consciousness. The revelation that *karaiyar* Mandhakini was not dead may have been startling but it had also removed, in one stroke, the leaden weight that had burdened his heart all these years. Then too, Arulmozhi Varman's residence in Nagappattinam was a great consolation, for Choodamani Viharam was an extremely resilient edifice built to endure and its dwellers, therefore, reasonably protected from any and all external perils. As for Aniruddhar's bolt from the blue about the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani possibly being his daughter … as outrageous as it may have been, Sundara Chozhar could not help but appreciate the absurdity—which brought an appreciative smile to his lips more than once.

Quite a few moments were spent in light-hearted conversation involving a good deal of back-and-forth banter, with him interjecting a few choice compliments about Kundhavai's aptitude for beautification.

" … for you have transformed a savage wandering about the woods into a dazzling Indrani of *Devalokham*, haven't you?" he continued. "But surely you could have found a better subject than this haggard old woman—a charming youngster such as Vanathi, for instance?'

He teased gently. Then, he turned his attention to Poonguzhali, asking hitherto unknown details about Arulmozhi Varman.

She obliged as much as she could, concluding with a plea. “Allow me to return to Kodikkarai, *Swami*. I may do so tomorrow, mayn’t I? After all, I need worry no more about my aunt—”

“Nor your cousin, abed with a raging fever, I suppose?” The Chakravarthy mocked her good-naturedly. “You need not be in such a tearing haste to leave; stay here a few days!”

Poonguzhali preserved her silence.

***

Sundara Chozha slept well, that night. For the first time in many nights his slumber was undisturbed by nightmares; even his dreamscape was pleasant and comforting. Likewise, soothed and tranquil did the royal ladies sleep in the chamber adjacent … but for one exception: Mandhakini, who tossed and turned, unable to rest, for the day’s events had caused a great deal of turbulence in her otherwise serene temperament, her thoughts flitting erratically between the treasure vault and the subterranean passage. In particular did her failure to splinter Raavanan’s limbs and close down the secret path cause her endless anguish, allowing her not a moment’s respite. She twisted upon her bed, eyes roving endlessly in the weak illumination supplied by the *thoongavilakku*, especially towards the windows dotting the upper balconies.

Midnight passed; these were the early hours, and the third *jaamam* was tapering to an end …

… when she glimpsed a shadowy figure at one of the upper windows.

With a terrifying face that seemed hideously twisted to Mandhakini, it peered into the room below, nearly plastered to the enclosure on the

floor above. Startled out of her wits, she jumped up, for she now had a fairly concise idea of the figure's identity. She stared at the window again—to find nothing. The shadowy form had vanished.

She tiptoed to the entrance of the room adjacent; the Chakravarthy was lost in sweet slumber. The windows lining the balconies above this chamber seemed devoid of human presence, as well.

Mandhakini returned to her bed as noiselessly as she had left, and woke her neice, fast asleep, with a gentle touch. She, jerking awake, stared at *Oomai Rani*'s expression, alarmed. Mandhakini bid her follow in simple gestures and Poonguzhali, devoted to her aunt above and beyond all, rose and went in her wake without a sound.
Oomai Rani walked steadily towards the *sirpa mandapam*, removing a *thoongavilakku* from its bracket on her way along the meandering corridor. Once they were at their destination, however, Poonguzhali hesitated, seized by a sudden misgiving: was her aunt about to renew her attack upon the lord of Lanka? If that be the case, wouldn't every soul in the palace be roused—and reiterate that Mandhakini was indeed a lunatic beyond redemption?

Well, I have no choice but to prevent such an eventuality, she resolved, as she followed her mentor into the chamber of sculptures. *I shall have to grab the chisel from her hands if she attempts any such thing* … ah, but wait! What—what on earth was this? One of Raavanan's heads appeared to move—no, it wasn't his, exactly … but someone else's that appeared to rest between the demon king's heads and Mount Kailaasam.

It disappeared the next instant and Poonguzhali shook her head in turn, surprised at herself. Such delusions; undoubtedly a trick played by her drowsy brain … or even the dancing shadows of sculptures, thrown by the newly introduced lamp!

It was unclear if Mandhakini had had a glimpse of this bizarre spectacle, but there was no doubt that Raavanan's statue was her goal—although it became apparent, much to Poonguzhali's relief,

that the chisel that lay at its foot did not merit her attention. Instead, she raised the lamp in her hand towards the inky darkness that shrouded the space between the demon king's heads and limbs—and Kailasagiri … revealing the hollow within.

Poonguzhali's assumption had been accurate then; here lay the exit of a subterranean passage, wrought so cunningly that it would rouse no suspicion at all to outsiders. And then, a flash of insight illumined her hitherto foggy brain: her aunt had attempted to close this very opening, that evening—an attempt the others had hindered, having entirely misunderstood her motivation.

Even as Poonguzhali arrived at this conclusion, her aunt signed to her to follow as she folded herself—not without some difficulty—into the sinuous gap, lamp still in hand, and began to descend … until, slowly, bit by bit, first her body disappeared, then her head and finally, the light of her *thoongavilakku* as well, leaving behind only the faintest illumination. Poonguzhali followed suit, bending, twisting and turning every which way through the exit, her considerable agility coming into play as she descended as well, careful not to bump her head against the roof. Within moments, she had vanished down the subterranean passage and with her the last of the light, allowing darkness to shroud the *sirpa mandapam* once more.

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Morning brought Malayaman's daughter, Kundhavai and Vanathi the startling realization that *Oomai Rani* and Poonguzhali were not in their beds. A rigorous hunting expedition throughout the palace, the royal gardens and *sirpa mandapam* yielded no results. Aunt and niece had vanished without a trace but how or why, no one could decipher.

The Chakravarthy, when informed of these worrying developments, felt some concern, but dismissed it. "Good riddance to bad rubbish," he shrugged. "Who cares about those lunatics or their fate?"

For all his flippant remarks, however, it could not be denied that small tendrils of a vague, indefinable unease and alarm snaked into his heart—and twisted it.

Hidden Meanings and Explanations

Andal Knot

A way of dressing tresses by heaping and curving the hair into a neat knot on one side of the head. Reportedly, this was a hairstyle favoured by Lady Andal, the young daughter of famed Vaishnavite saint Periyazhwar and no mean poet herself, for she composed the renowned Thiruppaavai, sung even today in Thamizh Nadu during the month of Margazhi (December 15—January 15).

Chapter 37

Kadambur, Disconcerted

Ever since Aditha Karikalan arrived at the palace of Kadambur, those who dwelt within its massive walls—permanent residents and tenants, temporary—discovered that everyday existence was akin to stepping gingerly on a thorn-strewn thoroughfare, or negotiating a flaming floor; such were the agonizing *asthrams* and poisonous darts deployed with devastating accuracy by the prince's tongue, lashing out without warning and pulverizing anyone within striking distance. Naturally, the atmosphere was rife with apprehension; stifling with tension.

Many were the hints he dropped, some covert, others overt about the not-quite-so-secret conspiracies to help Madhuranthakan to the Chozha *simmasanam*—sly taunts that tormented his auditors without mercy. Periya Pazhuvettarayar in particular could not bear these barbs, insisting, in a private audience to Sambuvaraiyar that it would be in everyone's best interests if the lords disavowed secrecy for good and chose to reveal their sentiments without further ado—a proposal that did not quite have the desired effect.

"Pray, *pray* possess yourself in patience; he is our guest, after all—stubborn rogue, or worse," his host prevaricated. "What if our excellent intentions are misconstrued and the consequences end up being the opposite of our expectations? We had better wait for an opportune moment," he counseled postponement.

The crown prince of the Chozha *samrajyam* appeared to entertain different ideas for, far from subjecting his hapless hosts to an eternity of awkward conversations, he initiated inquisition on the tabooed subject one day, in the midst of an informal gathering.

"The purpose of my visit was to acquire the invaluable insight of my Pazhuvoor *Thaatha* and Kadambur *Mama* upon a most important issue; I shall do so, now," he opened the gambit in deceptively dulcet tones. "As you are aware beyond all doubt, my blessed father crowned me heir to the throne in an extremely public coronation ceremony—a decision that had your undisputed support and approval. Now, however, the Chakravarthy appears to have undergone a change of heart; allegedly, he now desires deeply to set Madhuranthakan upon the throne—which is why he sends one invitation after another for a visit to Thanjavur, all of which I refuse, seeking one excuse after another. For—why on earth must I journey all the way to the capital? And then disregard my father's injunctions to his face? Surely it would be far better to never even present myself? Come, come, put forth your valued opinions, oh Pazhuvoor grandfather mine and Kadambur Uncle, for you tower above all in age and omniscience—you must and shall advise me: is it just, after all these years, of my father to ask me to defer to Madhuranthakan?

And would it be unfair of me to refuse such deferment?" Aditha Karikalan queried, all virtue, all sweetness—and yet, forthright and direct.

Naturally, such a plain question, thrown right into their midst, could be productive of nothing but an immediate, stunned silence.

"*Komagane*," Characteristically, it was Periya Pazhuvettarayar who threw himself into the breach first, clearing his throat with the intention of delaying the inevitable—whether answer or outburst. "Your highness has doubtless broached the subject to your Thirukkovilur grandfather? What was Malayaman's honoured opinion?"
"Ah, you know his unflinching sentiments," Karikalan seemed to dismiss said sentiments with a regal wave of the hand. "Would he suffer, even for the barest moment, the idea of his grandson's *simmasanam* bequeathed to another? Rather hack me and my mother into a few paltry pieces. And he's begun to muster his own *sainyam*, of course, to re-instate his grandson's rights, to address my perceived slights … not that I have the slightest intention of emulating just him, of course. No, I shall follow your wise counsel, whatever it may be." Thus, in tones dripping with the guileless innocence of a naïve child …

… a ruse that seemed to have deceived Pazhuvettarayar, at any rate. "Far be it from us to instigate son against father, like a certain Thirukkovilur lord, for we are honour-bound, every single one of us, to accede to the illustrious Chakravarthy's commands, whatever they be," he answered sanctimoniously. "And yet—surely it is our right, nay, responsibility to judge what is honourable and fair? And surely it behooves us all, thus, to accept that his sentiments may not be entirely out of the realm of justice? That Madhuranthaka Thevar's claims to the Chozha throne and *samrajyam* are not entirety invalid, and therefore, the possibility of his accession cannot be denied outright? Since you have demanded of us an explanation, your highness, I make bold to lay this, the most sensitive of subjects before your distinguished self; the final decision is yours and yours

alone—for to prolong this state of affairs would prove detrimental, nay dangerous, for the kingdom, in our collective opinion. It would, therefore, be in everyone's best interests to arrive at a compromise of some sort, one that would be beneficial to all concerned—for Chozha *samrajyam* is no longer of narrow dimensions, constrained between the two rivers Vellaaru, but spreads mightily from the tip of Kumari to the river Krishna and even if divided, should still boast not inconsiderable proportions. Justice would be served, indeed, if the region south of the Kollidam is offered to Madhuranthaka Thevar and the north, to you. This, your gracious highness, is our considered opinion—and should you consent, arrangements shall swiftly be undertaken to set the apportioning process into motion. As for convincing the Emperor—you may safely leave that in my capable hands!" he finished with aplomb.

A moment's surprised silence—and Aditha Karikalan collapsed into peals of merry mirth, which had the effect of sparking a seething inferno in Pazhuvettarayar's belly. "An admirable scheme indeed, dividing Chozha *rajyam* into northern and southern territories, to be lorded over by the Sambuvaraiyars and Pazhuvettarayars respectively—just and fair, in fact, and an apt reward for the stellar service of your two dynasties to mine, from the ancient times of my father's grandfather … except that I haven't the slightest desire to hack the kingdom into pieces. Rather split the affections of a wife, wedded in full view of the world, my *thaali* around her neck—for I see no difference between the two. *Kizhavars* such as you might frankly care not a jot and find yourselves amenable to such a despicable arrangement—but I wouldn't, and couldn't!"

This incendiary speech naturally had its intended effect: Periya Pazhuvettarayar jumped up, his battle-worn eyes spitting sparks of fury, sinewy hands drifting towards his scabbard, about to whip out his broadsword.

"Ah, why rise in such haste, *Paatta*, and why this urgency to leave the discussion—especially when I am yet to reveal the entirety of my intentions? Hark, my lord: I have no desire whatsoever to divide this

country—this ancient land, once a middling kingdom that has now grown to be a magnificent *samrajyam* upon the blood, sweat and bloody sacrifices of nearly five generations of your own valorous self, your illustrious ancestors and mine, warriors amongst warriors all, and without compare … to split it now, whether into two or thirty, as it steadily ascends towards greatness would be a sin beyond reprieve; an ignominy that would completely justify the scorching curses of our martyrs and forefathers such as Rajadithyar. Therefore, abandon this scheme, I say, for I shall have no qualms in renouncing my own right for this immense empire in favour of Madhuranthakan—as I do believe that his claims are not without merit; his ascension would only be fair and just. For, look you: he is the son of my *periya paattanaar*, my father's elder brother, and should have succeeded to the throne after him … instead of which my father took his place on account of Paranthaka Chakravarthy's arrangements. A mistake the consequences of which shall, hopefully, be erased with him for I, though possessing every right of ascension through the ancient laws of primogeniture—shall renounce them in favour of Madhuranthakan … subject to a stipulation: I require a *sainyam* of three lakh soldiers to mount a northern invasion. Not to mention the stores, ammunition and equipment to sustain such a force; food, grain and provisions to last at least a year—and three hundred ships to sail the turbulent seas … all this, and I shall appoint Parthibendran commander of my navy while I march upon the north, landwards. We shall meet at the source of the Ganga, he and I, and storm forth northwards, upwards and onwards—for our bards have sung paeans to the ancestor who bears my name, the illustrious Karikal Valavan—of his magnificent feat in hoisting the tiger flag upon the Himalayas, a feat that I shall accomplish, in my turn … and through the vigour and valour of my trusty broadsword, the indomitable spirit and vitality of my sworn army I shall capture lands north of the Krishna; undisputed king and chivalrous Chakravarthy of kingdoms wrought by my hand and heart! And if I do meet my end in the attempt—I shall embrace an honourable death, the due of a true soldier with a song in my heart and ascend warrior-heaven, knowing that I have heaped immeasurable glory upon the illustrious Chozha dynasty … well,

Pazhuvoor *Paatta*? Kadambur *Mama*? Will you consent to this condition of mine? Will you allow me to fulfill my ambition?"
His oration, a sparkling example of regal rhetoric finally at end, Karikalan paused and leveled a majestic glance at his gaping audience but more particularly at the two older men, who seemed to have been stunned into silence.

When Pazhuvettarayar finally spoke, it was in a voice that practically shook with emotion. "Pray, who are we to accept your grave stipulations—what right do we possess?" He asked, overwhelmed. "Is that not the Chakravarthy's—"

The words had the effect of enflaming hitherto smouldering embers; Karikalan jumped up, his face convulsed with almost unspeakable fury. "Ah, the Emperor—ask the Emperor indeed—*Paatta*, whom do you seek to deceive with these paltry speeches; these deceptive discourses? Not me, certainly!" The words were sheer, molten magma. "You didn't seriously believe that I was unaware of your actions—of your imprisoning my father in the palace while you forced him to dance to your disloyal tunes, master puppeteers all? Can anyone possibly seek an audience with him these days without Chinna Pazhuvettarayar's permission? And was the command to arrest my young brother in Eezham a result of the Chakravarthy's will? Or yours? Which devoted father would even consider imprisoning a warrior among warriors and the darling of all of Chozha Nadu, the people's cherished son? Every single subject is now seething with wrath beyond words, convinced that yours was the hand that signed the warrant to arrest Arulmozhi; yours were the men who forced him in warships and finally, yours the will that consigned him to a watery grave—"

"Who—who dares accuse us of such an appalling crime, your highness?" Pazhuvettarayar well-nigh screamed. "Name him—name him at once! I shall cut out his devious tongue with my own hands, and hang and quarter him into the bargain …!"

“One tongue, perhaps; even one man—but ten thousand? A hundred thousand? Ten lakh men? Would you butcher them all—for, see you, Chozha Nadu would turn into a cemetery, a cremation ground overflowing with hacked human parts—a most fitting kingdom indeed for Madhuranthakan, who prides himself on his piety, and who might rule bleak desolation as an austere Siva Peruman … not that I believe the nonsense spouted by random subjects, *Paatta*, for the mob is largely foolish and disinclined to reason. A man might create a cock-and-bull story without recourse to research and tens of hundreds might parrot it without pausing to wonder at its truth. You might rest assured, *Paatta* that I shall never believe such heinous allegations against you who have stayed staunchly by the Chozhas for generations with nary a flinch; Arulmozhi’s drowning can be attributed to his dreadful destiny and nothing else. All those astrologers, soothsayers, palmistry experts and diviners, every single one of them spouting a farrago of nonsense about his future; that he might someday ascend to such greatness as to “rule all the three worlds!”—bah! He must have descended to the very bottom of the oceans just to prove them all wrong; died just to shove mud in their mealy mouths, as they say. For *Paatta*, not even you, as valorous as you are, could have wrought a gale mid-sea, nor flung a divine thunderbolt out of the blue upon his ship and sails—a monstrous act that I would attribute to Pandiya magicians, rather. You are absolved of this sin, and therefore the culpability for Arulmozhi’s pitiful fate as well. But never, *never*, henceforth bleat that the Chakravarthy’s opinion is paramount, or even Anbil Brahmaraayar’s—as the whole world is privy to the fact that neither holds their positions of their own free will; that what holds sway is, in fact, *your* will … admit, if you must, that it’s perhaps the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya *Paatti*, Nandhini Devi’s approval and consent you seek, above all—”

“*Ayya*!” Kandamaaran broke in, almost at a shout, at this point. “To speak thus of our guest—who dwells here, in our house, a recipient of our hospitality—an honoured—” He floundered, his tongue stammering as he groped for the words, almost beside himself.

“Ah, how remiss of me; how very remiss of me, Kandamaaraa!” Karikalan swung around to face his young host, his bloodshot eyes spitting sparks of sheer wrath, not unlike a towering Siva Peruman Himself, a veritable lord of destruction leveling a fiery stare that engulfed Thiripuram in a roaring inferno. “Unforgivable indeed to forget that this is your home; the House of Kadambur, in fact—such a knave as I am to have let that fact slip my mind—not to mention that you are the inestimable scion of Valvil Ori, Lord of Kollimalai,” this, with a bark of harsh laughter. “I ought to have bitten my tongue, cowered in nervous fear at the very least. Most thoughtless of me, clod that I am, to have spoken my mind in your home, in your esteemed, illustrious presence—I seem to have forgotten my place indeed … but what have I said, pray, that drives you into such a fret; that inspires you to take offense? What sort of base slur have I possibly cast upon our honoured guest—my word, Kandamaaraa, why do your limbs tremble so? You haven’t been afflicted by Eezham’s terrible ague, have you? Considering you haven’t even been there …” he paused, his voice silky with spurious consternation.

“Not a fever, *Komagane*,” Vandhiyathevan sneaked in neatly, at this opportune moment. “Merely fury that you referred to the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani as a grandmother!”

The sly words were all the kindling required to fan a smouldering flame into a roaring blaze and Kandamaaran half rose, his face a twisted mask of wrath, hands moving towards his scabbard of their own volition—when Parthibendran intervened, grabbing hold of the Sambuvaraiyar scion’s wrists, pushing him back into his seat and whispering words that evidently doused the fire of outrage. For all his quiet, however, his body still shivered and shook, in the aftermath of righteous indignation.

Karikalan flung a peal of derisive laughter in his direction, before swinging once more in Pazhuvettarayar’s direction. “Ignore him, *Paatta*,” he smoothed, his rather harsh tones belying the diplomatic words. “A gamboling colt, you see—and we know how the young

behave; heedless, tactless and inclined to rear at the slightest hint of … well, anything. Disregard them, if you please—surely the Ilaiya Rani is my grandmother, since you stand to me in the position of a grandfather? Neither my *paatti* nor you, my *thaatha* can possibly find yourselves in the doldrums at my addressing you thus—why, then, must these children consider it such a heinous offense and jump about like cats on a hot tin roof? Be that as it may, I've meandered far off my chosen course, and shall now return to it: pray, desist from over-burdening the Chakravarthy, if you please; your consent carries the same weight as his, not to mention that the treasury is under your capable protection, after all—which means that you could satisfy my military requirements; I should think not three, but thirty lakh Chozha soldiers would fall all over themselves to volunteer towards a northern invasion! Three hundred measly vessels are hardly a matter for consideration, either. Now, all I require is a sanction—both from you and Madhuranthaka Thevan, and that should take care of everything." Karikalan paused, confident. "Well? What of it?"

Judging from his flabbergasted expression, it would seem that it was Pazhuvettarayar who was at the end of a long peroration—for he appeared utterly incapable of speech, so swiftly had the wind been taken out of his sails. "Even if I should consent to your wondrous proposal, *Komagane*," he cleared his throat, feeling his way through what seemed a diplomatic minefield. "Surely Madhuranthaka Thevar's permission is required as well, not to mention the Chakravarthy's blessing towards such an auspicious *digvijayam*? It behooves us all to journey towards Thanjavur—"

"Oh, that would not do, *Paatta*, not at all, I'm afraid; should my father's commands change once we're in the capital, I'd be hard put to disobey—not to mention the presence of such luminous ladies as my mother, Malayaman's daughter and my sister Ilaiya Piratti, neither of whom would countenance my renouncing the crown for the austere life of a nomad and whose wishes too, I'd find difficult to disregard. Nay, Grandfather; this weighty issue must and shall be resolved in the palace of Kadambur; you alone shall repair to

Thanjavur and escort Madhuranthakan here, whereupon we shall discuss the succession and determine a course of action amongst ourselves—after which my father shall be informed of all that transpired. Once the preparations for my northern invasion are complete, I shall visit Thanjai and bid my parents farewell … that, or Madhuranthakan may be crowned right away, and I shall ensure my parents' safe residence in the golden palace that I've had built for them in Kanchi—after which I shall take my leave."

Pazhuvettarayar risked a glance at Sambuvaraiyar, who was gazing studiously at the roof as though an architectural intern. Judging—accurately as it were—that no assistance would be forthcoming from that quarter, he allowed himself the mental equivalence of a shrug. "Dare I even countermand your command, *Komagane*?"

"Ah, not a command, *Paatta*—that I, a mere child should bark orders at one whose hair has gone white in our service!" protested Karikalan. "Say, rather, that you shall do me the honour of heeding my respectful plea, won't you?"

"Very well," Pazhuvettarayar assented, clearing his throat as though erupting into a roar.

"My eternal gratitude to you, *Paatta*—and pray make haste towards your journey; Madhuranthakan may be escorted upon an elephant in full view of the public—or even a golden chariot; don't have recourse, I beg of you, to the Ilaiya Rani's closed palanquin!" Karikalan cackled, tickled by his own wit. Then, he turned a knowing countenance towards his young host. "What a phenomenal stroke of luck for you, Kandamaaraa—you're about to be deluged by a sea of further visitors! Madhuranthakar especially, the man who would be Chakravarthy after Sundara Chozhar, perhaps escorting his soon-to-be *pattamakishi*, Chinna Pazhuvettarayar's daughter … ah, the Kadambur palace shall be a stupendous site of celebration! And once my Pazhuvoor *Paattan* has departed for Thanjai, so shall we, on our own expedition—a glorious hunt—come! Once, I'd earned a fair name for myself with a bow and arrows; those who knew my skill

would marvel that *for archery, Archunan had no equal and after him, neither does Aditha Karikalan …* But it's been three years since I indulged myself; I must return to my old, martial rhythm … Parthibendra, Vandhiyatheva, make yourselves ready for a hunt; where shall we go?" Karikalan threw a question generally. "Kollimalai, perhaps?"

"Too far away, *Komagane*, involving a long, tiring and unnecessary journey," Sambuvaraiyar, who had spoken nary a word all this time, bestirred himself. "Rather, I would suggest the western banks of the Veera Narayana Lake—which boast woods so dense and wild animals in such numbers as to be called a *dhandakaaranyam*, an impenetrable jungle, almost. In fact, the trophies in our hunting chamber were all claimed in this forest … a part of which adjoins our palace, in fact. One may depart in the morning and return in the evening."

"As you please in every way, *Ayya*, for as long as I am your guest, your slightest suggestion shall be my law in word and deed," Karikalan assured readily. "And may your daughter Manimekalai accompany us? For I couldn't help but notice that song and laughter abound, wherever she is."

"Mine shall not be the objection," Sambuvaraiyar offered, cautiously. "If Manimekalai wishes …"

"I don't see the need for women on a hunting expedition," Kandamaaran barged in at this point, rather mutinously. "We'll be forced to spend all our time ensuring their safety, rather than the chase. Besides, ought Nandhini Devi be consigned to loneliness on our account?"

"Ah, yes; night or day, our dear Kandamaaran anguishes endlessly over my Pazhuvoor *Paatti*; he has no thought for anyone else … wait, here's another conundrum, nay, a worrying concern about Manimekalai in our company: what if someone should mistake her high-spirited song and dance for a fawn's lovely gamboling and fire

an arrow? Good heavens, no; the ladies shall stay safe at home; we, the men, shall go alone. An early start tomorrow means an early end to the *kuravaikkoothu* festivities tonight, and bed, right away. *Ayya*, pray send word to your hunters at once; come, Vandhiyatheva, onwards to our quarters!”

The crown prince swept away, practically dragging Vallavarayan by the wrist, watched by Kandamaaran and Parthibendran with not a little jealousy and resentment; Sambuvaraiyar left at once to issue commands to his hunters; for his part, Pazhuvettarayar went hunting as well towards the *anthappuram*, for Nandhini.

Chapter 38

Nandhini Spurns

Pazhuvettarayar’s state of mind, as he went in search of his lawfully wedded wife, was one of decided, if rather cautious enthusiasm.

To be honest, none of his hopes, beliefs and intentions when he embarked on this much-vaunted journey to Kadambur had come to fruition; not really. In his own rather domineering way, he had imagined luring young Karikalan to Sambuvaraiyar's palace and once there, forcing him into some sort of submission by means either drastic or diplomatic; the crown prince, he believed, would simply have no choice but to fall in line with whatever he, Pazhuvettarayar suggested, in concert with the Kadambur lord, of course. There was no other avenue for Sundara Chozhar's first-born …

… and this, despite the not inconsiderable perils of entrusting the entirety of the Chozha *samrajyam* into Madhuranthakan's untried and untested hands at once; delicate hands that were certainly alien to war and weaponry, as Pazhuvettarayar well knew. Malayaman to the north and to the south, Kodumbalur Velaan would be united in stern opposition to this scheme; range Karikalan upon their side—as would doubtless occur—and what were the odds that the kingdom would *not* explode into the bloodiest of internecine wars? And who, indeed, could predict its outcome …

… in addition to the fact that public sentiment was almost certain to be in favour of the Chakravarthy's sons, and completely against Madhuranthakan—especially when it was his own mother who led the vanguard of vehement opposition? Could one hope to stem the tide of public resentment with just a motley gathering of gruesome Kaalaamukars? And what of the revolts that might well augur the first stirrings of civil war in Pandiya Nadu, Chera Nadu and the countries north of the Paalaaru? What might or might not overset the present, precarious peace …

… all of which meant, therefore, that it would be as well to apportion half the *rajyam* to Madhuranthakan—and if it meant the southern region, the *Then Chozha Mandalam* with its capital as Thanjavur, then so much the better. Matters would resolve themselves one way or the other; certainly, Kodumbalur Velaan's fangs were sure to be pulled; then, a swift northern invasion would show Thirukkovilur Malayaman his place … and well, Karikalan's rough-and-ready

impulses and general recklessness were legion: sooner or later he would veer towards a flurry of heedless decisions that might well spell an early doom. Then … his will be done, for all the knots that tangled the kingdom would have been unraveled, and every cause for concern dissolved. For now, though, half a *samrajyam* would more than suffice.

These and more he had discussed in great detail with Ilaiya Rani Nandhini, only after which had been decided a future course of action, entailing the journey to Kadambur—and the invitation to Aditha Karikalan, as well.

But none of what he had anticipated actually transpired, of course. Far from cowering before his elders, the crown prince chose to engage in verbal combat at every turn, jousting, provoking and all but jeering at them without pause; Periya Pazhuvettarayar was hard put to let slide the sly taunts and double-entendres—some of which did not seem entendres at all, so overt were the mocking digs. Particularly vicious were the jibes about “old men,” and the constant sneering references to “Grandmother Nandhini;” all finding their unerring mark in his wizened, squirming skin like quivering darts of deadly venom. As if adding unbearable insult to overwhelming injury was Sambuvaraiyar’s conduct which had slid from unwavering steadiness to a sort of insipid silence which chafed Pazhuvettarayar beyond all imagining—for, far from curbing Karikalan’s outrageous behaviour, the Kadambur lord seemed inclined to keep his lips sealed, and raise not a protest. Even if he did open his mouth under extremely rare circumstances, it was to utter inane platitudes that made Pazhuvettarayar wish that he had said nothing at all. Likely, this wishy-washy attitude was prompted by overpowering caution that prevented a host from criticizing such a puissant guest as the crown prince of the Chozha *samrajyam* … but whatever the motivation, Sambuvaraiyar’s conduct was far from worthy of Pazhuvettarayar’s approval, these days.

As for Karikalan’s fantastic piece of rhetoric today—the Pazhuvoor lord could not quite decipher how much of it was true; how much a

cunning verbal trap, a right-royal deception that involved honeyed words and a horrifying snare … and how much just plain nonsense. Had he devised some sort of devious plan that might be set into motion, once Madhuranthakan, all unsuspecting, had arrived? Was Malayaman mustering a massive army this very moment, one that would be deployed with deadly efficiency and surround Kadambur palace with no hope of reprieve?

All things considered, a return to Thanjavur seemed expedient; Chinna Pazhuvettarayan was a man of acumen, a *mathiyookhi*, and one who could proffer excellent insight into what was, to ordinary eyes, a murky morass of statecraft. Not to mention that if Madhuranthakan should be escorted here after all, Kalanthaka Kantan would prove an extremely effective back-up at the head of his own vast forces on the banks of the Kollidam. Whatever the strategies planned and outcomes anticipated, it was now unnecessary for the Ilaiya Rani to tarry in this palace another moment, the butt of every callow youth's abhorrent joke; the subject of every rogue's despicable humour; her place was rightfully in Thanjavur—and surely any opportunity to take her home, God-given as it were, ought not to be wasted?

Periya Pazhuvettarayar was conscious of some relief, even a guarded optimism once he had arrived at this decision, and was almost at the fringe of a certain zeal as he reached Nandhini's *anthappuram* … when, at the door, a merry peal of laughter accosted him.

A tendril of prickly annoyance curled in his belly at the charming sound, for some inexplicable reason. Not once had his young queen ever laughed thus, in Thanjavur; why here, now? What would she chuckle at and with whom, pray?

He took a stern step within, only just short of barging in, seeking and finding at once her companion; young Manimekalai, as it turned out —a discovery that went some way towards easing his suddenly troubled mind.

For her part, the Kadambur princess caught sight of him and seemed, desperately, to stifle her mirth by stuffing her fists into her mouth—a ploy that failed miserably; unruly giggles escaped despite herself as she skipped gaily out of the chamber.

Not for Nandhini such boisterous behaviour; her mirth had ceased at the very moment of Pazhuvettarayar's entrance—and her lovely countenance had regained its customary majesty. "Welcome, *Ayya*," she asked him in hospitably. "And has your council come to its conclusion?"

"Why on earth was that dratted girl giggling fit to burst, Nandhini?" He demanded, his irritation exploding before anything. "And why run away, still laughing?"

"If you must needs ask about trivialities, I'll have to answer, I suppose. Our dear princess-in-residence found herself in the chamber next to the *sabha mandapam*, and appears to have eavesdropped on a few choice pieces of the royal conversation. Most amusingly did she recount Prince Aditha Karikalar's merry speech about grandmothers and grandfathers—and was overcome with laughter, naturally."

"*Chee*, the little hoyden! And for you to laugh with her, of all things —!"

"I did—only because I meant to weep once she'd left," Nandhini's voice caught on a sob, as she delicately wiped away a tear that trembled on her lashes. "But you arrived, and put a halt to that too."

"Aha, beyond redemption indeed am I, to have brought you amongst these uncouth rogues and scoundrels! But pray, endure for just this night, for we shall leave for Thanjavur tomorrow, you and I—"

"Thanjavur?" Nandhini raised her eyes swiftly. "Why? Is our task here accomplished?"

Pazhuvettarayar embarked, promptly, on the impromptu council that had just ended, recounting every speech made; every promise sworn.

"*You* may leave for the capital by all means, *Swami*," she pronounced, once the recital tapered to its end. "For my part, I've no intention of beating a craven retreat without teaching Aditha Karikalan a long-due lesson. That dastardly wretch shall either fall at your feet and beg a royal pardon for his boorish behaviour and crude insults—or fall prey to your mighty sword!"

"Good God, Nandhini, how could—surely you could not harbour such treacherous thoughts in your heart!"

"Treachery, *Swami*? Appalling treason, you say? Surely it is the right, nay duty of every devoted wife to punish the rascal who speaks ill of her husband? To avenge the insults of one who impugns the honour of my lord who clasped my hand in holy matrimony, *Ayya*?"

"True, but—hark, Nandhini: the Pazhuvoor clan has bound itself to the Chozhas in friendship for well-nigh six generations; surely I cannot ignore the claims of such glorious fealty and raise arms against a mere child who might have blurted a few ridiculous slurs? To put to sword the crowned heir to the throne, the firstborn of Sundara Chozhar …" Pazhuvettarayar's alarm was palpable. "What sort of heedless speech is this?"

In truth, his dread and dismay had roots in the disturbing similarities between his wife's incendiary speech and his own deep-seated instincts; she had merely given voice to his thoughts … for had his hand not drifted towards his scabbard, once or twice during Karikalan's uncalled-for oration of abuse? And had he not had to stifle his rage and attempt some semblance of equilibrium at his slights?

“Hear me well, *Ayya*: you may indeed claim a friendship of six generations and unfettered fealty for more; your hands may thus be bound in loyalty, and shudder to raise a sword against them—but I am hindered by no such ties, and recognize no obligation to the Chozhas. Therefore, if Aditha Karikalan shan’t come to his senses, mourn his mistakes and crave pardon by prostrating at your feet … I shall wield my sword, and chop his head myself!”
Her eyes, as she uttered the fearsome oath, were bloodshot; her brows furrowed with fury—and her face an unrecognizable, distorted mask of scorn.

Her transformation into avenging angel seemed complete.

Chapter 39

“Nemesis is Nigh!”

Pazhuvettarayar laughed.

His first instinct was to chuckle scornfully, albeit gently, at Nandhini’s outraged oration … but the sound that escaped his throat thundered around the chamber in a way that set every object trembling. A warmth enveloped his breast as his beloved swore to execute, with her own sword, the one who insulted him—a warmth that owed everything to pride; a pride that exulted at the devotion and loyalty exhibited by Nandhini; a smug satisfaction that could not but preen at her intense eagerness to avenge his slighted honour. Even as a part of him wished desperately for her to continue in the same vein, another—the part that claimed to disclaim such vainglory, as all loyal

warriors should—desired to make it known that such speeches were not at all to his taste.
“Why do you laugh, *Ayya*?” Nandhini demanded. “Such little faith in my oath, have you?”

“Nay—merely at the idea of your hands, delicate as beautiful *Mandhara* flowers, going to all the trouble of hefting a broadsword, especially when here am I, right by your side, a warrior with both my long arms intact—”

“Not unaware am I, *Ayya*, of the valour and strength of your arms: arms rivaling an elephant’s long trunk in girth, Indran’s celestial *Vajrayudham* in sheer, uncontested vigor; hands that accosted and annihilated thousands upon thousands of soldiers in the battlefield; hands that establish and uphold royal authority by placing a glittering crown upon the heads of generation upon generation of Chozha monarchs … but not a soul cares aught for such glorious accomplishments; these are inglorious times when you are assaulted by boys born yesterday who scorn you with the term *kizhadu* … while you, dread lord, suffer in agonizing silence as befits one bound by the unbreakable bonds of Chozha fealty as though a king cobra, a *sarbharaajan* mesmerized by a *mandhiram*, a chant! Indeed, *Ayya*, you speak no less than the truth when you describe my bangle-laden hands as soft and delicate—but even these slender limbs acquired some semblance of strength, my lord, once they grasped the war-scarred hands of a veteran such as yours, with Agni as our witness. And if the time should ever come—if it should ever transpire that I must protect my virtue and guard my husband’s peerless honour, my hands too, shall gain, in an instant, the power required to raise a broadsword—observe, my lord!” And from underneath her luxurious mattress, she pulled out a long box, opened its lid, hastily swept aside a few garments on top, hefted a sword—newly repaired, its blade glittering and flashing—that lay at the bottom and swung it well above her head with a certain swashbuckling nonchalance.

This last dramatic performance certainly had its effect on Pazhuvettarayar, who stood staring at the sword, startled. “Why, how

long has this lain hidden in this box?" He asked, finally. "A box, I believed, for your ornaments and attire …"

"Indeed, and it has never been anything but," Nandhini answered serenely, as she returned the sword to its resting-place. "My box contains my precious ornaments, of which none is more valuable, more priceless than this; my jewelled weapon, my protection; the guardian of my virtue, and my husband's honour."

"Not that there shall ever rise the slightest opportunity to use it—not as long as I live."

"Precisely why I do not brandish it in the open—for can you not avenge insults to your glorious self, repulse baseless slurs against your integrity yourself, you who protect and secure a Chozha *samrajyam* that extends from Eezham to Vengi? Or guard a defenseless woman such as myself? Nevertheless, there might occur certain situations where your lordship might be engaged elsewhere, upon grave matters of royal import—when you might be in no position to raise arms on my behalf … and surely I must arm myself then, ready to encounter peril? Surely I must preserve my chastity thus, in your absence?"

"Surely there exists no need for such extraordinary measures, *Devi*? Be that as it may, I certainly harbour no intention of leaving your side, henceforth …"

"That is my dearest desire too, *Ayya*—but I must steel myself for a separation just this once; just this once you must leave me for Thanjavur—"

"But why this stubborn insistence, pray? Why are you so intent on my making such a journey?" And Pazhuvettarayar's bushy brows drew together in a frown.

"For two reasons, *Swami*—and both extremely pertinent. Should you persuade me into accompanying you, the both of us shall doubtless

provide more grist for an avid gossip-mill; they will mock us more than ever, these dishonourable scoundrels. *That's all the trust that kizhavan places upon the Ilaiya Rani*, will fly ribald remarks … and I needn't tell you that my blood boils at the very idea. The other reason is political, and therefore far more important. You have trusted and thus treated Sambuvaraiyar as nothing less than your dearest friend—but surely you've noticed a marked change in his speech and behaviour ever since the prince arrived? I have, even if you haven't—"

"His altered conduct has not escaped me either; I must confess to wondering at his motivations."

"Your heart is pure and your conscience without a blemish, lord, which is why you wonder and marvel—but I don't. Avarice is a human failing, and one that characterizes Sambuvaraiyar to the hilt. Reports may have reached you of Prince Aditha Karikalar's rumoured abhorrence for women, and even his intention to eschew marriage … but you must have seen that his conduct, once he stepped inside the palace, has indicated anything but. He enters the royal ladies' quarters often, and engages us in charming—I might even add—flirtatious conversation … a change I will not hesitate to attribute to his marked preference for Sambuvaraiyar's daughter Manimekalai. After all, he did enquire if the hunting party could take her along, didn't he? Her father has been more than aware of these developments, of course—and all previous arrangements have been overthrown in the twinkling of an eye. I've no doubt that he's already indulging in rosy castles in the air of his daughter queening it upon the throne of Thanjavur …"

"Indeed, indeed, you must be right; it cannot be otherwise. Not that I suspected him of such pettiness, think you—nay, nor even dreamt of such overweening self-absorption—why, the entire realm foregathered in this very palace a bare two months ago, swearing to uphold Madhuranthakan above all and now, to dismiss such a pledge … *chee*! What sort a man entertains such despicable—"

“Precisely why I decline to accompany you, *Swami*. In your absence, I shall examine their conduct most carefully for devious conspiracies —and should they actually have the temerity to engage in such, find any way I can to defeat their paltry ruses …”

“This is all very well Nandhini, but—why must *you* enter into all this?”

“Shouldn’t a dutiful wife make her husband’s concerns her own? Is that not her life’s work? The very word “helpmeet” means that, surely? A trusty companion for life?”

“Still, to leave you here, alone amidst these wretched rogues and scoundrels … my mind is not at ease, I admit.”

“I’m not without assistance, my lord—there’s Manimekalai, who will do anything for my sake.”

“Not that that escaped my notice; your celestial charisma has enslaved her too—but for how long? And how far? Especially if Aditha Karikalan has promised her the sun and the moon, in the guise of raising her to the Thanjai throne as his royal consort, his Chakravarthini—”

“You need entertain absolutely no fears on that score, *Ayya*; not even the position of the divine *Devalokham*’s Indrani would Manimekalai accept, if it be contrary to my sentiments. In fact, should I command her to *execute Karikalan with this sword!* she would, without a moment’s hesitation. You’ve mentioned my celestial charisma more than once, haven’t you? Well, it holds her in my thrall completely; let me prove it to you here and now!”

The Pazhuvoor lord’s body quivered with barely restrained emotion at this masterly speech; when he could finally gather himself enough to speak, his lips trembled and a lump seemed to choke his throat. “*Devi*,” he began, and even his majestic voice quavered. “No one could be more aware of your power—your mesmerizing presence than I—but pray, *pray* do not seek to demonstrate them with either

Karikalan or his concerns. A mere child, a reckless, heedless boy blurting words with neither thought nor tact—spare him not a moment of your time, I beg you. And if …" he hesitated. "If he should be of a mind to wed Manimekalai, well, we ought not to bar his way."

"We mayn't wish to throw a wrench in his precious schemes, *Ayya*—but there's such a thing as destiny, surely? And who may gainsay such a cosmic entity? I cherish an affection for Manimekalai that is equal to hers for me; I love her as I would my own younger sister … how, then, could I possibly consent to binding her with one whose longevity is suspect? Whose very life may not last?" Nandhini's limpid gaze, as she uttered these ominous words, seemed to be dwelling on something, some event happening far, far away.

"Good heavens, Nandhini, what on earth—" Pazhuvettarayar's emotions reached fever pitch at this point. "Nandhini, what is this that you say? Once, I was the head of the Chakravarthy's Velakkara Regiment; I swore a bloody oath to guard the Emperor and his sons —with my life, if necessary …"

"A pledge that I certainly haven't prompted you to break, *Ayya*?"

"Not in so many words, perhaps, but your offense, if any, against Karikalan shall still be laid at my door; the world would castigate me as *an old man who unleashed his wrath upon a mere boy's tactless speech* and our excellent name, a byword for loyalty earned over six generations of painstaking fealty to the Chozhas would be ruined beyond redemption …"

"Which only indicates, my lord …" Nandhini declared in a voice redolent with mystery. "… your precipitate departure."

"Why do you say so?" He demanded.

"Long have I been hesitating how to broach the subject, *Ayya*—but the time, it appears, is now upon me," she began with a preamble. "You're aware, I know, that I am the recipient of more than one

mystical power; divine gifts by the grace of Durga Parameswari Herself. It was due to these, my extraordinary perceptions, that I divined the secret of Sundara Chozhar's misbegotten youth; that he was guilty of *sthreehathi*, the crime of killing a woman—a crime I revealed to you as well. And now, I see another's fate hanging in the balance; through my mind's eye, with the help of my acute perceptions do I divine that Aditha Karikalan's days are numbered; that his end is near. Neither at your hands nor mine—but I see, more clearly than ever, Yaman's celestial rope swing towards him, preparing to rip out his soul from his body. Death might stalk him as he gallops through the jungle on a hunting expedition—or even as he lies, rested and relaxed upon his bed within this very palace. Death might assault him through the treacherous claws of tigers, bears or other such wild animals—or fly upon swift wings through sharp arrows accidentally loosed by his own friends. Or perhaps …" her voice rose and fell, suave, smooth, seductive. "… perhaps through a sword wielded by the delicate hands of a woman? But I shall swear to you here and now, *Ayya*, that those hands shall not be mine, mine that clasped yours in holy matrimony. You took me, *Swami*, an orphan bereft by the roadside, into your home and heart—and not stopping with that, made me your queen, the Ilaiya Rani of Pazhuvoor … and never shall I be the cause of your ignominy. If anything, this is why I beseech you to leave, for should anything befall Karikalan as long as you tarry here, the entire world will unite in pointing the finger of blame at you. After all, they didn't hesitate to do the same for Arulmozhi's drowning, did they? And it would happen all over again this time—if not towards the actual crime, then in recrimination for your having allowed such a crime to occur, in the first place! But no matter what you do, my lord, what strategies you seek and measures you employ, even your hands, rivaling the *Vajrayudham*, cannot prevent Karikalan's doom—for his nemesis is nigh! No, you must leave at once and alone, for taking me will lay you open to even more baseless allegations; that you removed me from the scene, having had prior knowledge of his fate. Go you must and go alone while I stay here, striving tooth and nail to defend your peerless honour from the slightest taint; the faintest slur, no matter what happens and when. Would you—would you trust me to do so,

Ayya?" Finally at the end of her peroration, Nandhini paused and trained her exquisite eyes upon her husband, as though piercing his very heart.

Poor Pazhuvettarayar! That war-hardened veteran quailed before the avalanche of precisely aimed verbal arrows; lowered his already weakened defenses before the lances in her eyes … and raised the flag of abject surrender.

Hidden Meanings and Explanations

Helpmeet

Kalki uses "*vaazhkai thunaivi*"—a beautiful phrase that literally means "One who accompanies her husband through life."

Chapter 40

Water Games

Approximately six hundred years before the time of this saga, there jostled for space and supremacy with the *moovendhars*, the royal triumvirate, seven other kings—lesser in titles and holdings, perhaps, but so glorious in their prestige that they were known as "*vallal*"—benevolent monarchs who prided themselves on their ability to serve

and grant, as much as to lead and protect. One amongst these paragons of virtue was Ori, Chief of the Kolli Hills, and renowned as an archer without equal. Legend quoth that if he ever nocked and released an arrow from his fearsome bow, it would pierce through a tiger first—and then a deer—and then a boar—and then a rabbit—and lastly a tree in quick succession, much like Lord Rama's impressive arrow that struck through seven trees simultaneously. Such was Ori's phenomenal skill and so many the songs by poets and bards on his talent that he soon acquired the title *Valvil Ori*—Ori, Archer Beyond Compare, evermore.

Such glory cannot but attract festering grudges; the valiant Chera king's ire against Kolli's Ori was quickly fanned from a flickering spark to roaring flame—and in a bid to battle him, he sought the alliance of Thirukkovilur's Malayaman Thirumudikkaari, whose own valour was no less than Ori's ... and whose armed forces considerably outstripped the latter's in sheer numbers. Never one to shy against warfare, Kaari marched upon Kolli, vanquished Ori, and annihilated his mountain fortress.

But stay—there was another who ruled the regions adjacent to Kolli; Athigaman Nedumaananji by name, and one who claimed kinship with Ori, to boot. Naturally, Valvil Ori's end could not but rankle, and he wished to avenge the humiliation upon the instrument of his defeat—but aware, like the Chera king that a solitary enterprise was out of the question, he requested the assistance of the Chozha monarch, Killi Valavan. This proved a fortuitous alliance, as Thirumudikkaari's growing strength, not to mention his increasing friendliness with the Cheras had kindled considerable unease, if not outright anger amongst the Chozhas—and a coalition was formed instantly, leading to an attack upon Malayaman. The lord of Thirukkovilur lost his life in battle; his two young sons were imprisoned and dragged by Chozha soldiers into the presence of Killi Valavan and Athigaman, who were both determined to grind the entirety of Malayaman's clan into the dust.

Their bloodlust was set into prompt motion; Malayaman's children were buried into the ground up to their necks—and their heads to be trampled by elephants, by royal command.

It was at this ominous moment that a bard appeared—one who cherished love and loyalty for Malayaman, of whose benevolence he had heard a great deal, and of whose generous spirit he had personal experience. He walked straight into the presence of the Chozha monarch, and begged for the lives of the princes.

"Look yonder, Majesty—witness those children, buried in the earth up to their necks—observe their glowing faces; their radiant smiles! They laugh and giggle at the sight of the swaying elephants and their waving trunks, thinking them to be some sort of amusement! Is it these innocent lives that you seek to take? Why, what on earth have they done? What crimes have they committed? Must they pay the price for their father's sins?" The poet cajoled, pleaded, begged—and cajoled again … upon which the Chozha king's sentiments slowly underwent a transformation. He relented, released the children from their muddy prison—and when the eldest came of age, returned to him the Thirukkovilur *rajyam*.

Thenceforth, generation after generation, the Malayaman dynasty bound themselves in friendship, gratitude and fealty to the Chozhas—a bond that lasted well into Sundara Chozhar's reign; his queen consort and *pattamakishi* was Malayaman's daughter, Vaanamaa Devi.

Kolli Valvil Ori's and Thagadur Athigaman's descendents may have perished over time—but Kadambur's Sambuvaraiyars proudly proclaimed themselves as descended from Ori's extended family and therefore his heirs. Ori's friends through the generations were theirs—and likewise their foes; the Sambuvaraiyars neither forgave nor forgot their ancestor's ancient enmity towards the descendents of Thirukkovilur Malayaman—therefore, it was not to be expected that a grandson and heir of their hated rivals would meet with their approval, nor his ascension to the Chozha *samrajyam* and dignities,

their wholesale endorsement. And then, there was Aditha Karikalan's own behaviour.

The first, faint embers of Sambuvaraiyar's dissatisfaction had been fanned into flames of outright loathing at his unbearable arrogance and his obvious, and unnecessary belittlement of the lords and chieftains. He cared not a rap for their outraged honour and showed it—a fact that endeared him even less to the Sambuvaraiyars, who began to endorse the claims of Kandaradhithar's son Madhuranthakan to the Thanjai throne in right earnest, and threw themselves into his cause with wholehearted enthusiasm.

But then—then said Karikalan arrived in Kadambur … and Sambuvaraiyar found that his hitherto stalwart heart was undergoing a transformation by degrees; a transformation that could be directly attributed to his beloved daughter, Manimekalai. For the signs were propitious; signs—and there seemed many—that she had managed to steal the heart of the redoubtable crown prince.

Word, guaranteed, assured word that Aditha Karikalan was indifferent to women; that he had vowed to shun matrimony for a life of celibacy was rife—and yet, witness his conduct ever since he stepped within the Kadambur palace, endlessly slipping into the women's quarters and engaging them in enthusiastic chitchat! In particular did he praise Manimekalai's *chootikai*—the liveliness and gaiety that characterized her, while she herself seemed to be at the height of spirits ever since his arrival, which Sambuvaraiyar took to indicate her newly blossoming love for him.
He gazed often at this suddenly promising pair; their combined animation and zesty conversation made his own spirits soar. If Karikalan married his daughter—his beloved Manimekalai would take her place upon the throne as Chozha Chakravarthini! Her son would be the heir to the *samrajyam*! And then … the honours and dignities now the exclusive privilege of Thirukkovilur Malayaman would be his too, some day; his would be the pride of place as grandfather to the crown prince—and why, pray, must he stand in the

way of such glorious destiny? Why must he play spoilsport to his own daughter's dazzling future?

True enough that Sambuvaraiyar had once entertained the idea of matrimony between Manimekalai and Madhuranthakar; of course he had—he would not deny it, certainly—but the latter was much married even then, with two wives; Chinna Pazhuvettarayar's daughter was his chief consort and had lately birthed a son. Should Madhuranthakan actually ascend the throne, it would be Pazhuvettarayar's dynasty that claimed kinship with the Chozha heir—while Manimekalai would be relegated to the bleak back chambers of the Thanjai palace, no different from a *chedippen*, a maid servant amongst the scores already lining the corridors.

Wedded to Karikalan, though—she would be the *pattamakishi*, and any son born to her would succeed to the Chozha throne. And after all, surely it would be no easy task, a *bramma prayathanam* in fact, to make Madhuranthakan king? Not to mention overcoming the veritable tsunami of public disapproval, crested by his own mother, and which might be accomplished only after pitched battle against Malayaman and Kodumbalur Velaan … really, was this enterprise really worth such extraordinary effort?

Now, crowning Aditha Karikalan king, on the other hand … why, his coronation had been decided, unanimously determined and declared ages ago, and should encounter no hurdles in execution—barring the Pazhuvettarayars' stubborn opposition, perhaps, which would likely prove a massive wrench in the works. But stay—the elder was buried fathoms deep in love, nay, mired in lust for his ravishing Ilaiya Rani; who knew how long the *kizhavan* might survive—and how wise would it be to blunder into a dangerously delicate mission thrust solely upon a doddering old man's faltering shoulders?

True, he had indeed pledged to support Madhuranthakan's cause, body, heart and soul—but what of it? Surely there could be found a way to fulfill his newly realized ambitions without breaking his previously taken oath, so to speak? No secret, of course, that

Madhuranthakan was naïve beyond belief; could not that naiveté be employed to make him declare, of his own volition, that he “did not wish to ascend the throne?” Or—stay—even better, and much less complicated: insist on his acquiring his mother’s endorsement to kingship!

Thus Sambuvaraiyar’s deep and devilish cogitations—which resulted in his enthusiastic approval of Pazhuvettarayar’s impending Thanjavur journey. No better opportunity than now, in the Pazhuvoor lord’s absence, to engage Aditha Karikalan in a confidential conversation and divine his true state of mind—after which, doubtless, a compromise could be achieved that would be satisfactory to everyone, mostly Sambuvaraiyar himself. And so, the Kadambur lord was most assiduous in personally overseeing the preparations for Pazhuvettarayar’s swift departure, eventually bidding him and his retinue a rapturous farewell.

Aditha Karikalan and his cohorts started upon their much vaunted hunting expedition once the ancient war-lord had “taken himself off,” Sambuvaraiyar fully intending to send Manimekalai and the rest of the royal ladies in accompaniment—but for the strenuous objections of Kandamaaran …

… Kandamaaran, who had been observing the landscape, so to speak, with a keen, if critical eye—and who had divined as his father had not, that Karikalan’s solicitude for Manimekalai sprang not from pure motives but a decided partiality for Nandhini … a realization that prompted a surge of loathing in his hitherto loyal heart; a loathing that could neither be revealed nor explained to his willfully blind father. Thus his strenuous protests about *escorting ladies upon a hunt; not to mention worrying about their safety* … This was the month of *Aippasi* as well, renowned for its torrential downpours, he pointed out; the women would be caught unawares on flooded banks and in muddy morasses.

In the face of such obstreperous objections tinged with practicality, Sambuvaraiyar was forced to discard his profitable scheme; Aditha

Karikalan departed on his expedition in company of his friends Parthibendran, Vandhiyathevan, Kandamaaran and a host of other hunters.

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Devoid of their raucous presence, the Kadambur palace seemed bleak in the extreme, as Nandhini pointed out to Manimekalai. “Men seem such pests when they’re around that you wish them a thousand leagues away—but when they *do* leave, that’s a nuisance too,” she mock-sighed. “We’re left with nothing to tease and taunt. I call that unfair, don’t you?”

“Indeed, *Akka*,” her boon companion chimed in. “I wish we could’ve gone with them—I do love watching a hunt. I’ve accompanied my father and my brother on a few expeditions … I wonder why Kandamaaran was so stubborn about us staying at home?” She wondered. “Perhaps out of consideration for your feelings—if you found hunts unpleasant—”

“I won’t deny that they’re not exactly to my taste; the very sight of blood terrifies me … not that that was Kandamaaran’s motive, my dear,” Nandhini sent her friend an arch look. “His intentions, if I’m not mistaken, were to separate you from one of your esteemed guests!”

Manimekalai dimpled prettily at this; gazed at the floor for a few moments, before speaking up. “Ignore the menfolk, *Akka*; we don’t need them or their precious company, do we? I wonder if we could visit the lake’s *neeraazhi mandapam*?” She suggested, bright-eyed. “We could play in the water to our hearts’ content, couldn’t we?”

Nandhini assenting to this delightful scheme, she flitted away on fleet feet to seek her father’s permission and see to the various arrangements.

***

We've seen before, haven't we, the massively raised eastern banks of the vast Veera Narayana Eri, bearing seventy-four splendid canals? The western banks of said lake, however, were of much less colossal proportions; in fact, neither high nor huge, the lake bed growing shallow by degrees as it approached the shore, tapering into a gentle, non-threatening gradient where it touched land, flattening into a pleasant beach almost, of sorts. Further west, the plains merged into dense jungle.

Floating upon the translucent waters that lazily lapped the shore were several miniature islands, luxuriating in dense foliage and trees; the banks of one of these boasted stairs, and a *neeraazhi mandapam* of charming proportions. It was here, to this simple structure that the ladies of the Kadambur *anthappuram* repaired often, disporting themselves merrily in the water or engaging in various amusements. Reaching the secluded place was a painstaking process that involved a journey of nearly two *kaadhams* skirting the lakeshore; this and its reputation for being the Sambuvaraiyar ladies' preferred bathing spot meant that it was largely free from the incursions of locals.

Nandhini and Manimekalai were rowed to this island by two maids who clearly knew their way around both crafts and cooking implements, judging by the way they beached the boat, jumped ashore and began to assemble the various components of a sumptuous meal in a most competent fashion.

The royal ladies idled upon the quay-stairs for a while, lost in pleasant gossip—for Manimekalai, that lively spirit, was possessed of a keen wit and not a little love of mimicry, and proceeded to indulge in mischief by imitating Pazhuvettarayar, Karikalan, Kandamaaran, Parthibendran and Vandhiyathevan to the hilt, sending Nandhini into gales of mirth. *Galeer*!—*galeer*! rang out peals of the Ilaiya Rani's merry laughter and yet—and yet, it was obvious that for all her enjoyment, she was not all at the quaint *mandapam* but subject to fits of abstraction, thoughts obviously lost in some secret reverie.

“*Akka*!” Abruptly, Manimekalai sprang up with a cry. “We might not have accompanied the hunt—but the hunt has certainly come to us!” And she whipped out a dagger from her waist.
Nandhini jumped up as well, startled, her eyes swiveling almost automatically in the direction of Manimekalai’s sharp gaze—and caught sight of a leopard lounging upon a large branch, scrutinizing them almost lazily, as though contemplating a leap upon one or both of them.
Precisely at this moment came another sound from a little distance—the sound of horses splashing noisily through water.

Hidden Meanings and Explanations

The Moovendhars

Literally, ***The Three Kings***; the Chozha, Chera and Pandiya monarchs who always ruled over ancient Thamizhagam, to the exclusion of almost everyone else. From time to time, their borders broadened and shrank as they fought endless wars establishing dominance over each other while lesser chieftains acted as allies.

Chapter 41

Karikalan's Murderous Mania

Didn't we hear Aditha Karikalan's rueful admission in a previous episode of his lengthy abstinence from hunting? And his misgivings about having practically forgotten archery?

Those who witnessed his skill with the bow and arrow that day, in the jungle upon the banks of the Veera Narayana Eri certainly could not agree and were hard put to count the wild animals that fell to his weapon: rabbits, deer, bears, leopards—and when one could not be sighted upon land, even hapless birds in the heavens; vultures and *rajalis* tumbled from the sky, shrieking their dying agony.

The crown prince's murderous mania seemed to swell with every moment, so much so that his companions had very little to do in the way of hunting. The uproar and commotion of horses and riders thundering through the forest, yelling at the top of their voices sent every wild animal scampering from lairs and burrows—which was all the assistance the rest of the hunting party rendered. Not even were they allowed to aim at any beast that broke cover in Karikalan's direction; when Kandamaaran proceeded to do just this—nock and release an arrow upon a bear that bounded towards the crown prince—the latter swiveled towards him in an instant. "Were you aiming at the bear? Or me?"

Kandamaaran lowered his bow, his face a mask of impotent fury—but never raised his weapon, thenceforth.

When the sun touched the zenith, fatigue finally overtook the party; everyone was ready to snatch a brief rest and return home—everyone except Karikalan who seemed not to care in the least, and kept pushing his exhausted stallion through barely discernable forest tracks.

Were you aiming at me? Kandamaaran, whose horse had ridden so close to his royal master all morning so as to almost nudge him aside, had fallen back after that caustic question; now he trotted sluggishly by Parthibendran, pouring into his ears a stream of complaints at Karikalan's iniquitous behaviour and outrageous speech—with the Pallava prince trying valiantly to appease his lacerated feelings by applying the balm of soothing nothings …

… all of which meant that the space beside the crown prince was now unoccupied; a lack soon rectified by Vandhiyathevan, who neatly slid into the spot. Thereafter, the duo galloped ahead of the party together.

The Vaanar warrior had not brought along his bow and arrow. Not that they would have been much use, for he was not very proficient in their use—instead, he was armed with his trusty spear. This also

meant that he could cautiously accompany Karikalan without committing the cardinal sin of interfering with the prince's prey while also primed to launch the spear in case of danger—a situation that did not arise until high noon.

By now, Kandamaaran was clearly done. "Surely we've hunted enough for the day? Isn't he going to pause until every single beast has been slaughtered? At this rate, only the teeming jungles of wild Kolli can satiate this sort of broiling bloodlust!" He turned to Parthibendran, somewhat desperate. "Do tell him to have done, and go home, will you?"

"Some sort of turmoil rages in his heart, *Thambi*," his companion poured oil over the troubled waters of Kandamaaran's composure. "No easy task, after all, to renounce an entire *samrajyam*, is it? And all he's doing is to burn out his murderous wrath through hunting these forests. Excellent, I'd say—or he'd slake all his bloodthirsty urges through us. I'd let him be if I were you, and finish the hunt when he pleases. Let's not poke our noses into his mission to exhaust himself."
A deep, terrifying growl reached them at this precise moment—a growl that thundered and rumbled through the forest, setting every branch trembling; every leaf quivering.

"*Ayyo*," A flicker of panic twisted Kandamaaran's features. "Wild boar—stop! Tell the prince to halt at once!"

"Why—what on earth are you panicking for?" Parthibendran demanded. "When tigers and bears fled the prince's path—"

"You don't understand; the boars hereabouts would tear apart massive tigers and bears—mow down an elephant! Horses are barely a threat—arrows and spears would hardly break the hide, let alone pierce flesh … *Ayya*!" Kandamaaran shrieked at the top of his lungs. "*Ayya*, halt!"

Suddenly, just ahead, the dense foliage shook and whirled as though twisted by a tiny tornado—and the next instant bounded out two breath-taking specimens of wild boar, each large, dark form boasting the massive proportions of a small elephant. They paused in their headlong rush, their eyes boring intently into the approaching cavalcade of humans and horses.

“Careful, *Ayya*—on guard!” Kandamaaran screamed warning.

Some of the hunting party, having arrived that very moment, proceeded to bang their *thaarai* and *thappattai* instruments with a frenzy and speed usually associated only with death throes, accompanied by full-throated shouts and yells. “Haa—kooh—aaghh—kaa!”

One can only wonder at what the wild boars themselves made of all this cacophony: perhaps terror for their safety? An overpowering instinct to ensure the welfare of their offspring from these seemingly marauding humans? Or just plain, overwhelming panic at the ear-shattering noise? Whatever the reason, the animals split direction—and began to run hell for leather.

“Good riddance to those pests, *Komagane*,” Kandamaaran called out. “Wild boars can’t be brought down without at least five or six hunting hounds—”

Karikalan paid not the slightest heed to this sage advice, bent his bow, nocked and released the arrow which found its mark on the boar’s back. “Aha!” burst an exclamation of exultation from his lips—only to die away, as the animal gave a vigorous shake, dislodged the arrow as though a paltry twig, and scampered away.

The chortle that escaped the Kadambur scion then, held unmistakable shades of scorn—scorn that made Karikalan whip his head towards him. “A challenge, Kandamaaraa! I and Vandhiyathevan shall pursue and hunt down one of those boars, while you and Parthibendran go after the other—we’re not returning

to the palace until we've slaughtered them both!" And he spurred his stallion into a ferocious gallop, Vallavarayan at his heels.

For a while at least, signs of the boar's boisterous flight were obvious: such was the veritable whirlwind of destruction wrought upon shrubs, bushes, vines and creepers in its chaotic wake. A little ahead, a miniature canal cut through their path, after which it was well-nigh impossible to determine the beast's progress: over the canal and further into the forest? Or to the left and right of these very banks?

It was at this moment that a sight met and caught their surprised eyes, and riveted their combined attention: through the opening afforded by the canal could be glimpsed the wide lake—and on its vast surface, an approaching boat. Its occupants could be clearly divined as ladies—if not their identity, alas, at this distance. At first, it seemed as though the small craft was coming in almost exactly their direction, but it shifted course in a few moments before clearly veering towards another of the many islands dotting the shores.

"Who do you think they were, Vallavaraya?" Karikalan enquired. "Seemed like womenfolk, to me."

"To me as well, *Ayya*," concurred his companion. "But I couldn't recognize them."

"The Sambuvaraiyar ladies, perhaps?"

"Likely—but why so far from home?"

"As you say. By the way … Pazhuvettarayar did leave this morning, didn't he? Is that absolutely certain?"

"There's no room for doubt; I saw the gates swing open and his departure upon his elephant."

"Just him?"

“No one but the *kizhavar*; certainly not the Ilaiya Rani.”

“Ah, where on earth are we ever to encounter another such as him, a warrior among warriors? I should place even my own grandfather Malayaman only next to him, in valour—”

“The only exhibitions of valour I’ve known about them is through exaggerated hearsay … but your courage I’ve witnessed with my own eyes, *Ayya*, especially in the Kadambur palace,” declared Vandhiyathevan. “Why, you set all those men, young and old, quivering with your verbal assault, didn’t you?”

“True, but now that the very reason I set everyone quaking; the very motivations behind my verbal assault as you put it, is leading me towards the opportunity I seek, the meeting I must attend … I find that I dread it, body, heart and soul. You couldn’t find a more despicable coward in all of Chozha Nadu if you tried—”

“I’m not sure I saw any evidence of such cowardice, as you put it, during the hunt today, my prince. Didn’t you terrify every bird, beast and paltry human—set them shaking in their shoes?”

“Ha, you call this courage, do you? For shame, Vallavaraya. A hunting hound rips a dreaded tiger to pieces; a wild boar battles a crazed elephant without the slightest fear … what’s so fearsome about a petty hunt, pray? But hark: my conspiracy to boot Pazhuvettarayar out of the premises without Nandhini has worked, and yet, when I consider the mere idea of speech with her—alone …” Karikalan paused. “I’m stricken with blind panic.”

“A reaction that isn’t without a certain rationale, *Ayya*. You were wont to consider her in a certain light all this time—but now, you know the truth; that she’s your sister … and well, she’s sworn a bloodthirsty pledge to annihilate your entire clan—in company of her cohorts, the Pandiya plotters, to boot! Not that I don’t appreciate the complexities

of broaching the topic to her; after all, I had a chance myself … but couldn't."

"Certainly, every single piece of information you relayed was startling, to say the least. In fact, my friend, I still can't quite wrap my head around it all … but there may well be a foundation of truth to your revelations, considering a few memories that oddly surface now and then. There's always been a veil—a shadowy, misty veil between us; Pazhaiyarai Periya Piratti, Sembian Maadevi, that is, didn't approve of our friendship—in fact, she dissuaded us quite forcefully from pursuing it, as I remember. Not that she mentioned a word of her reasons … reasons that might have prevented all of this from transpiring."

"It's possible that even she wasn't aware of the whole truth, *Ayya*. She may have simply known her as the orphaned child of a mute runaway. She may never have known …" Vandhiyathevan paused delicately. " … that the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani is, in fact, the daughter of Sundara Chozhar."

Chapter 42

“She is no Woman!”

Karikalan was lost in reverie for a few moments, seemingly overwhelmed by a veritable tsunami of adolescent memories, each punishing wave rising and battering the shore of his mindscape mercilessly, churning it into a roiling, seething mass before giving way inexorably to another. He managed to barricade them with a sigh of resolution, before finding his voice again. “Let bygones be bygones; I’d rather speak of what is to come, rather than what has been—which is why I dragged you alone, all the way here,” he squared his shoulders. “Well, we’ve certainly failed our challenge; that boar is gone for good. What we must do now is come to some sort of decision about what must be done and how …. Good God,

Vallavaraya! I'm blinded by panic at the very idea of broaching to Nandhini the subject of our relationship. I daren't even raise my eyes to hers—and if ever I do, by accident, she willfully arranges her face into the same expression as when she begged me to spare Veera Pandiyan. Her eyes pierce me like twin broadswords; my heart breaks when I realize that my own sister was so much in love with my sworn enemy that she wanted him spared … what do you think?" Karikalan's words tripped on his tongue. "You don't still believe her ignorant of the truth, do you? You don't still think her unaware of the fact that she's the daughter of Sundara Chozhar? That she's our sister?"

"*Komagane*, she'd hardly have schemed with Pandiya plotters if she had, would she? Or placed a mere child upon a throne and crowned him Pandiya king and Chozha Chakravarthy in an act of defiant enmity against the Chozhas? Or sworn a bloody and horrendous oath to protect and preserve, upon a broadsword, the child's crown against all foes? None of this can be denied, for I saw them happen with my own eyes, at midnight in the Thiruppurambiyam memorial—"

"—and I'm frankly astonished that Nandhini spared you to tell the tale."

"Not I, Sire; I might have been the fortunate beneficiary of the natural compassion that resides in a woman's heart, mightn't I?"

"Ah, you naïve, ignorant little soul; not for you the evil machinations of a lady, nor the treachery and heinous betrayal harboured by a so-called woman. I know not why she let you live—but in my heart of hearts, I'm not unaware of her reasons for inviting me here."

"And … what might that be, my prince?"

"To assassinate me, and thus avenge Veera Pandiyan's execution."

"It was to prevent exactly such a terrible catastrophe that Ilaiya Piratti and Aniruddha Brahmaraayar dispatched me posthaste, *Ayya*. Not

that you paid the slightest heed to their instructions to desist from visiting Kadambur —”

“My sister and the Chief Minister are possessed of acumen beyond the reach of most people, Vallavaraya—but not even they can defy the strong arms of destiny, can they? All those phenomenal astrological predictions about Arulmozhi Varman … perhaps fate has dragged me here just to ensure that they’re fulfilled? Who knows? Who may guess? Did you observe Kandamaaran’s arrow during the hunt, Vallavaraya? Was he truly aiming at the bear? Or my exalted self? Could you tell?”
“I’m afraid I really wasn’t paying attention, *Ayya*—but I will stake my honour on Kandamaaran’s honour. Not in his wildest dreams would he even consider such bare-faced treachery; the very idea of shooting you, the Chakravarthy’s son and his honoured guest would be anathema to him. His wits don’t inspire in me the greatest confidence, I admit,” Vandhiyathevan permitted himself a wry smile. “After all, this is the very man who, once I’d rescued him from a near-fatal stab wound, turned around and accused me of having plunged the knife into him—all because I’d been the first person he saw, as I carried him to safety! The enmity that’s festered in him ever since hasn’t been lanced in the slightest, I fear—but half-wit though he might be, hardened traitor he isn’t.”

“You, my friend, are comprehensively ignorant of the incredible power of the *mohanasthram*, the lance of seduction wielded by a beautiful woman—for it can twist even the most honourable man into a treacherous bastard beyond reprieve.”

“I must disillusion you, *Ayya*, for I’m not entirely unaware of the charm offensive skillfully deployed by ladies—but it would never turn me into a villain.”

“Ah, but Manimekalai is an excellent girl, you see, and would never provoke you to treacherous tactics.”

“I wasn’t referring to the Kadambur princess, *Ayya*. Having been dazzled by the radiant full moon, could my sight be transfixed by a flickering *minmini*, a fluttering insect?”

“And who might be this dazzling full moon?”

“If you will not take offense, *Ayya*—Pazhaiyarai’s Ilaiya Piratti, of course.”

“*Ade*, you impertinent little—! Why, kings among kings yearn for the hand of my sister; emperors beg for the chance to wed Kundhavai, and the audacity of you daring to even think of her—”

“Beg your pardon, Sire, but the *poorna chandran*’s golden radiance and cool rays may be enjoyed by kings and emperors … as also the poorest of the poor; nothing can stand in the way of their basking in such celestial beauty, can it?”

“True enough; I suppose there’s no sense in upbraiding you for it. After all, I wasn’t unaware of your propensities when I sent you to her with an *olai* and you, by all accounts, acquitted yourself in a manner highly satisfactory to her. But never let a breath of any of this reach Parthibendran—he dreams of becoming a Chozha son-in-law someday and thus, once more, a Pallava king …”

“That may well have been the state of affairs until a while ago—but both Kandamaaran and Parthibendran are willing to bear upon their heads the slightest command at Nandhini Devi’s dainty feet …”

“ … a transformation that hasn’t escaped my attention and which, as a consequence, makes me rather apprehensive on their account.”

“All things considered, it seems best that you manage to meet the Ilaiya Rani as soon as possible, and divulge the truth.”

“The thing is … I’m not sure I’m brave enough. Couldn’t you possibly take my place?”

“She might not trust me enough to believe me, my prince. Besides, I managed to fling mud in her eyes once, so to speak, and escape; she might well consider my efforts to meet her some sort of conspiracy.”

“But—how could *I*, then, in private? Nandhini’s fairly incarcerated in the *anthappuram*, after all.”

“Not outside the realm of possibility *Ayya*—with Manimekalai’s assistance. Allow me to make arrangements.”

“You’ve certainly gotten that girl twisted around your little finger, haven’t you? Not bad at all. My mind shall feel some measure of ease, at all events, if I could see her wedded to you.”

“I consider her my own sister, *Ayya*; besides, I expect her to be the recipient of far greater fortune, one of these days—”

“What on earth do you mean?”

“Surely you could hazard a guess, my prince? It’s my assumption—well-founded, I believe—that the maiden Manimekalai has managed to find herself a place in the heart of Chozha *samrajyam*’s crown prince … I may have presented the Kadambur princess in a rather less-than-flattering light a while ago, but I had my reasons, believe me, not the least of which was to offer a hint of my own sentiments. The truth, *Ayya*, is that barring Ilaiya Piratti herself, there is no other young woman in the world who might aspire to be her equal in either wits or character. Should you join her in matrimony, all our troubles would be at an end. Sambuvaraiyar and Kandamaaran would instantly come to us, thus successfully isolating the Pazhuvettarayars—not to mention diffusing the Ilaiya Rani’s power. Madhuranthaka Thevar would never again build castles in the air about ascending the Chozha throne while plots and conspiracies, both those of the lords of the realm and Pandiya *Abathudhavis*, would be destroyed in one fell swoop.”

“This is all very well, *Thambi*—but my purpose in visiting Kadambur doesn’t take weddings into the equation … I tell you, some heinous peril stalks me without pause; I wouldn’t be surprised if Pazhuvettarayar returns with Madhuranthakan—and a massive army in tow.”

“If that be your concern, why not send word to the Thirukkovilur lord to arrive with his own forces? Forewarned is forearmed, after all.”

“Not that I haven’t considered that option, mind you. In fact … do you know the thoughts that race through my head, sometimes? I wonder if I shouldn’t just raze this Kadambur palace to the ground, impale every single despicable participant in that midnight conspiracy upon a *kazhumaram* right at the gates and …. but then, I recall my father, and stifle my rage. If you had only managed, somehow, to bring him to Kanchi—”

“Your highness, it was all I could do to make sure your *olai* even reached his hands! A *bramma prayathanam*, I should say—”

“Indeed; the Chakravarthy is well and truly trapped in the Pazhuvettarayars’ clutches—while bats flap around the golden palace I built for my parents in Kanchi. I’m not sure if I will claim the great good fortune of welcoming them there in my lifetime … in fact, I’m not sure if I will even leave Kadambur alive—”
“The more you speak so, the more crucial it seems, my prince, to send word to Malayaman for reinforcements—”

“I’m wondering if it might not be wise to dispatch you upon that mission too.”

“Beg pardon *Ayya*, but your sister has commanded me to never abandon your side a moment—”

“—a command that you’ve managed to fulfill most satisfactorily, I might add.”

“I might add, too, that Parthibendra Pallavar is rather unoccupied, at the moment; twiddling his thumbs, so to speak, and in acute discomfort at having absolutely nothing whatsoever to absorb his considerable attention—”

“As you say. Every moment without the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani gladdening his eyes seems to stretch into an incredible and never-ending aeon. I must say, of all my companions, I never expected him to surrender quite so readily to a woman’s charms. Yes, I shall send him to Malayaman, I think …”

“An excellent decision, *Ayya*.”

“And if something untoward—some danger—should threaten me, well, you’ll be by my side …”

“Regardless of your guard, the fact is that I don’t believe there exists anyone who’d even dare intend you the slightest harm. Those arrogant old men who had the audacity to make bombastic speeches in your absence—didn’t I see them all cower, tremble and stutter in terror when you appeared amongst them?”

“I fear not any man who would raise a sword against me, *Thambi*—nor even the detestable, nay laughable courage of those of Kandamaaran’s ilk, who would loose an arrow upon my back …”

“You refer to him again thus, *Ayya*?”

“Hark, my boy—it’s the treachery that resides deep within a woman that terrifies me the most. My heart pounds in sheer, unmitigated panic whenever I wonder at the sentiments she might harbour; my body shrinks and my soul shatters as though under a lance, at every one of her mysterious glances … and when I consider the implications, my limbs tremble of their own accord—”

“I admit, *Ayya*, that Nandhini’s betrayal is indeed a force to be reckoned with and an assault to quail under—for I’ve plumbed the

depths of her horrifying vengeance. I'm not beyond wondering, sometimes, if she possessed an ulterior motive, perhaps, in sparing my life … but surely all this could be explained by her ignorance of the truth? Surely there could be no further cause for worry if it were revealed that you were her brother?"

"You believe so indeed, do you? Ah, you're a bright young man, Vallavaraya, but still naïve, still an innocent, ignorant of the nature of women. Were Nandhini to divine the truth—that she is indeed Sundara Chozhar's daughter—her murderous wrath would burgeon a hundred-fold; nothing, not even the promise of raising her to the throne of Thanjai as Chakravarthini would appease her—"

"If these be your sentiments, then delegate to me this onerous task; I shall undertake not only the responsibility of divulging all to Nandhini Devi, but also attempt to extinguish her fury …"

"I'm afraid that would be beyond even you—beyond anyone. Nandhini's anger is not an obstacle that can be overcome. Hark, Chozha salvation rests upon one of these three outcomes: my death; hers; or the deaths of the both of us. Well, why not? Why not execute her with the very hands that beheaded Veera Pandiyan, after all?"

"Good God, my prince … what words are these?"

"Would that be such a heinous crime, Vallavaraya? Would it be such an insuperable offense to take a life to save a *samrajyam*? What of her status as a woman? Or that of my very own sister? Oh, she's no woman, no woman at all but a *maya mohini*, a ruthless demon in ravishing feminine guise—and to let her live—to spare her life is to annihilate without a trace the empire that was built with blood and sweat from the times of Vijayalaya Chozhar … wait, what was that?" And Aditha Karikalan paused in his feverish peroration to stare around, petrified.

Just ahead of them, within the riot of shrubbery and dense foliage seemed to rage some sort of pandemonium, a furious whirlwind almost, localized to within a few feet. The duo spurred forward their stallions towards the disturbance—to glimpse a truly extraordinary sight …

… the sight of a wild boar and a leopard engaged in gory, pitched battle.

“Ah, here’s our quarry!” Karikalan exclaimed.

“And it looks like the leopard will complete what we barely began,” Vandhiyathevan quipped.

“You think so, do you?” The crown prince commented, one eyebrow raised. “Wait—and watch.”

For a while, the erstwhile hunters stayed where they were, watching the ensuing skirmish without even daring to blink. To call it a mere skirmish would be doing it an injustice; this was all-out war, as the leopard pounced on the boar and tried to claw out its internal organs with gnashing teeth and claws—which the latter resisted by the simple expedient of using its hide, tough as a fortress wall, and which yielded not the slightest to sharp talons. And yet, the opposite was not true, for when the boar launched a full-fledged assault on the leopard by butting it savagely against the ground and tree-roots … the latter suffered agony. The boar’s razor-sharp teeth ravaged his smooth skin into shreds—and when he finally smashed his opponent into the ground mercilessly, the leopard lay crumpled on the ground as though dead.

“Now that the cat is done for, *Thambi*, the wild boar is likely to turn its attention onto his next target—us,” Karikalan cautioned. “We must make ourselves ready …” This, as he raised his bow.

The arrow he released certainly reached his quarry—but was far from turning it into prey, for it barely pierced the boar’s neck. The beast shook itself vigorously once, turned—and gave the men on their horses a long, hard stare. Then, it subjected the fallen leopard

to a calculating glare. Seemingly convinced that it was no more a threat than a paltry shrub, it bounded forward with terrifying, maniacal ferocity towards the horses … and before Karikalan could even think of fitting another arrow to his bow, pounced on his steed.

Alarmed at this unexpected attack, the horse backed up a little and then stumbled, its hind legs caught and snagged by gnarly tree-roots —and collapsed in a struggling heap, Karikalan trapped underneath. The wild boar took back a few assured steps, reared up—and bounded savagely, once more, towards the prone horse.

Chapter 43

“Where is the leopard?”

In an instant, Vandhiyathevan comprehended Aditha Karikalar’s extremely precarious situation.

Driving his stallion towards him in the blink of an eye, he raised his spear, aimed at the wild boar—and launched it straight and true. It managed to pierce the hide but the boar gave itself a vigorous shake; the weapon, only barely lodged, immediately loosened and likewise, Vandhiyathevan's already tenuous grip upon the spear, which slipped off the beast and clattered to the forest floor.

The boar now turned its wrath and attention upon this audacious new threat, and Vandhiyathevan realized that it was *his* situation that had turned perilous; his horse was in no position to outrun such a dangerous predator and his spear, on the ground, was no use to him. Karikalar was still trying to drag himself out from underneath his fallen steed; Vallavarayan's only option was to leap up from his horse onto one of the tree boughs above … and the very option could not but seem distasteful. *Chee*! To escape an hundred hazards and unimaginable dangers, only to fall prey to a petty wild boar, of all things? But what else could he hope for, pray?

Destiny seemed determined to lend him a helping hand, at any rate; a tree appeared just ahead, its leafy branches obligingly low—and Vandhiyathevan jumped off his horse's back and held onto it at the first opportune moment. Gathering every iota of strength from his toes to shoulders, he propelled himself forward, clambering further up the bough—at which precise moment the boar butted his stallion headfirst. The hapless horse stumbled for a moment before miraculously righting itself and galloping away at top speed.

Karikalar still underneath his horse and Vandhiyathevan high above, the boar now paused between its erstwhile human hunters and darted looks from one to the other.

Trying to choose a potential target, Vandhiyathevan's instincts quickly divined the motive behind its movements. The crown prince had still not managed to extricate himself and even should he do so, it was doubtful if he could protect himself, considering he was devoid of weapons as well. The best he could hope for would be to take up his bow and arrow, which would be complicated in itself had he been

badly injured in the fall … in any case, it was essential that he be offered an opportunity to at least try.

All these and more flashed through Vandhiyathevan's fertile brain as swift as lightning—and instantly, he came to a decision. "Aagh—ooh!" He screamed and shrieked, shaking and swaying the branch he was on with all his might.

The ruse worked; the boar discarded Karikalar seemingly in a flash, and bounded towards Vandhiyathevan's tree.

Ah, come on, come on, you savage beast; come forth and meet your nemesis in this trunk, the Vaanar warrior exulted—even as the bough he was precariously perched on gave a sudden, ominous shudder … and as though unable to put up with his vigorous shaking, gave up the ghost with a crash.

Ayyo! Good God— if this bough should break—if I should fall to the ground in a welter of leaves and twigs—this paltry beast would rip me to shreds with its gnashing teeth—gore me with its vicious tusks —my only chance of escape is to grab another branch!
To think was to act, and Vandhiyathevan accordingly followed his instinct, reaching towards what seemed to be salvation—but the bough he was now aiming for was, unlike the first, not quite so obliging and stayed tantalizingly just out of reach, not to mention much more slender and delicate—with the result that only one of his hands could hold onto it, and what hold he had was questionable at best. The bough bowed under his considerable weight; his grip began to slip, feet dangling helplessly in the air …

… *And I'm done for*, he thought, heart swinging wildly between hopelessness and a sort grim determination. *I'll fall in a minute, and be dead in a moment; there's no doubt about that. Well, I'd have helped save Aditha Karikalar at least, in the last moments of life and that should count for something, surely? Ilaiya Piratti would know some measure of relief when she hears of my sacrifice, surely? And shed a tear at my valiant death?*

A horrendously ominous noise reverberated somewhere near him—his frighteningly weak grasp finally loosened—and with a last gasp, Vandhiyathevan let go, screwing his eyes shut as he fell with a sickening thud … and promptly lost consciousness.

When he finally came to and opened his eyes, it was to Aditha Karikalar sprinkling water upon his face. Memory came rushing back; he straightened himself in a flash and sat up. “Good God, my prince—are you alive indeed?” The words tripped on his suddenly thick tongue.

“Indeed I am—owing to your kind offices,” came the answer.

“And the boar?”

“There,” pointed the prince, towards the beast that lay crumpled on the ground at a little distance, unmistakably dead.

“Heavens, Sire,” Vandhiyathevan stared hard at the inert form. “The havoc and destruction wreaked by such a small beast … Kandamaaran would seem to have been right about wild boars.” He looked back at Karikalar. “However did you manage to vanquish it?”

“I didn’t; you and your spear did.”

Vandhiyathevan stared at his lord and master as though his words were incomprehensible. “But—I don’t understand,” he admitted, at last. “It would seem that you used my spear well, for I did nothing; certainly, I couldn’t even lift a finger when you needed me the most …”

“Remember when you shook the bough, screeching at the top of your lungs? I managed to wriggle out from underneath my stallion almost simultaneously, grabbed your fallen spear, managed to concentrate all the wrath and fury bubbling within me—and launched it at the poor beast. My ear-drums were almost shattered as it

shrieked in its death throes … but the spear wasn't all that killed it; you slipped off the branch and crashed onto it … which is what really finished it, in the end," Aditha Karikalar finished for his part, with a wry chuckle. "The shock was too much."

Vandhiyathevan collapsed into gusts of laughter which were, it must be admitted, tinged with as much relief as humour. "I expect that's why I escaped without so much as a scratch," he remarked, once he had felt himself all over. "Ah, I can well believe now that the demon Hiranyaakshan was decimated by Lord Maha Vishnu in his incarnation as a boar, the Varaha Avatharaam … argh, what a ferocious, vicious beast!"
"Don't you dare compare Thirumaal's fearsome presence to this paltry little animal, *Thambi*," Karikalar chastised. "I've heard tell of a truly formidable species of wild boar sporting a single horn, roaming the jungles of the Vindhya Mountains in the North. Challenging the massive proportions of a mammoth, they say … and if such a one had butted the tree you were on, imagine its sorry plight!"

"The tree would've been upended by the roots, I dare say, and the spear smashed to pieces," Vandhiyathevan quipped. "We'd have been doomed all to hell and made every Chozha conspirator's devious scheme for annihilation null and void."

"Now, the truth, *Thambi*. When my horse stumbled and you flung the spear …" Karikalar paused. "Were you aiming at the boar? Or me?"

"Truly *Ayya*? Are you really questioning my loyalty, now?" Vandhiyathevan's ire rose, anger and mortification throbbing in his voice. "If suspicion has you in its strangle-hold, why rescue me? Why kill that beast for my sake?"

"Indeed, I oughtn't to doubt you; no—for if you hadn't shaken that bough and shrieked at the boar, I might have been the one dispatched to Yamalokham by now … but still, when you launched that weapon, for one moment—one terrifyingly unsure moment, I couldn't help but wonder if … my mind crucifies anyone and

everyone to the agonizing cross of suspicion these days; I cannot rid myself of the delusion that Yaman stalks me every moment, every hour of every day—I even believed that He had finally made bold to appear today in the form of this wild boar, and destroy me once and for all."

"Good riddance to bad rubbish in that case, I say," Vallavarayan remarked staunchly. "Death stalks you no more, for it has been decimated beyond question; there's no further cause for concern, is there? Even better," Vandhiyathevan brightened. "We've won the challenge with Kandamaaran; all that's left to do is to drag the boar back home … we can, can't we? Go home, that is?"

"Certainly, but what's the hurry?" Karikalar hazarded. "Surely we can tarry here awhile; enjoy a reprieve from exhaustion? Cast our cares and take our ease?"

"This is the first I've heard you refer to being fatigued, *Ayya*. And why not? You were trapped under that stallion of yours for quite a while …"

"A bare nothing. In fact, I meant more a mental fatigue than the physical … and as for home, must we return the way we came? The very thought of travelling in company of those prancing fools makes me wonder if we could, perchance, just cross the lake?"

"Swim across this veritable sea, do you mean? Good God, was it always your intention to save me from that wretched wild boar and sink me in that lake?"

"It hasn't escaped my memory that you can't swim. For that matter, neither can I—not this massive expanse, certainly. A boat, now—and didn't we catch a glimpse of one, lately? Surely it ought to be somewhere, close by? Surely we could initiate a search?"

"And what of our stallions, pray?" Vandhiyathevan demanded. "Leave them here to be feasted upon by wild beasts?" And then, he

bounded up, as though suddenly recalling something. "*Ayya* … where's the leopard?"
"Why, that wretched cat slipped my memory too. It's likely to have sneaked into some lair nearabouts … now that the boar is dead, what if Yaman resumes stalking me in the guise of a leopard?"

The duo stared around for a while, here, there and everywhere—before Vandhiyathevan finally pointed. "Look!"

One of the large canals pouring water into the lake narrowed steadily as it stretched northwards; a large tree had fallen across, its trunk conveniently spanning the banks … and the runaway leopard was now crawling across this makeshift bridge, stealthily making its way to the opposite banks … sparking exactly the same thought in the minds of the observing men.

"Aha, the women in the boat!" Both cried out simultaneously.

"They must have beached upon the island adjacent," Vandhiyathevan reasoned.

"And an injured leopard is doubly dangerous," Karikalar observed.

"Well, we'll just have to cart back home a cat with the boar, I suppose."

"I daresay—but how do we cross the canal? Our stallions couldn't step across the tree-bridge either—"

"The water's not very high; we could ford it on foot, don't you think?"

By now, the crown prince's horse had managed to recover itself somewhat and joined its mate, Vandhiyathevan's steed; both animals appeared to mimic their human counterparts, engaged deep in conversation; perhaps discussing their late, gruesome enemy and the attendant alarms and excursions?

The warriors leapt upon their backs and spurred them into the waterway—only to find that yes, there wasn't much water, but that lack was more than made up with an over-abundance of swampy mud.

The stallions stumbling and staggering through the morass reminded Vandhiyathevan of his late adventures. *Well, it's certainly not as horribly life-sucking as Kodikkarai's quagmires*, he consoled himself, and immediately launched into an account of his exact experiences to Karikalar.

"Ah, you speak of the swamps that litter the outside world, my friend—but what of the quagmires that riddle a human heart?" Karikalar countered ruefully. "Once you've descended into the quicksand of evil—steeped yourself in the morass of malevolence … how do you climb ashore?"

In truth, it's the crown prince's heart that's turned into a swampy morass, Vandhiyathevan mused.

The stallions having forded the muddy crossing with considerable difficulty, they traversed the jungle, peering carefully into its depths on both sides; Karikalan, his bow and arrow at the ready while Vandhiyathevan sat alert, his spear held aloft.

And then—then, a voice screeched; a female voice, shrill and shaky, drowning out all the usual sounds of the forest: "*Amma*, *Amma*, a leopard!"

One of the maids engaged in preparing a meal had glimpsed the runaway feline the same instant Manimekalai did—and set up a panicked scream.

The cry reached the approaching friends; goose-bumps prickled their skin and they kicked their stallions, spurring them into a gallop in the direction of the shriek … and the sight that met their eyes, once they

turned a corner on the lake's banks, was enough to ratchet their alarm to unprecedented heights.

Even as Nandhini and Manimekalai descended the steps of the quay for a swim, the leopard crawled gingerly up a nearby tree, climbing inch by inch into the thick, leafy branches.

Having battled almost literally to the death with the wild boar, the feline was on its last legs; its instinct at that moment was only to save itself—an instinct, regrettably, that was known only to its injured self, for to the swiftly approaching Karikalan and Vandhiyathevan, it certainly seemed as though the beast was about to launch itself on the women in the water.

The Vaanar warrior raised his spear and then hesitated; what if it missed its mark and pierced one of the ladies?

Karikalar, however, seemed to suffer no such qualms; raising his curved bow, he nocked an arrow, took precise aim—and let fly. It whirred through the clear air and punched through the leopard's lower belly. With a loud, terrifying growl, the cat leapt upon the women below, and …

… what happened next was rather difficult to gauge, for the entire scene dissolved into a cacophony of chaos.

Leopard and ladies seemed to vanish into thin air; all three re-appearing suddenly, a few moments later, their heads breaking the surface of the lake at different places.

Blood seeped through the waters, transforming the pristine glass into a deep, dark crimson.

Chapter 44

Love—and Lethal Revenge

The two friends, watching events above unfold at alarming speed, jumped down in tandem from their horses and bounded towards the lake shore at breakneck pace.

The leopard had floated into the waters a little distance by now—but the way it drifted rather sluggishly indicated that it might have finally given up the ghost. Life was long gone; what remained was just a lowly carcass.

As for the women, it was unclear exactly how badly they had been injured by their late feline predator—and the men leapt into the lake in a desperate attempt at rescue. The very idea of even approaching Nandhini sparking terror in his veins, Vandhiyathevan struck out towards Manimekalai.

For her part, the Kadambur princess had sustained no grievous hurt rather than a brief breathlessness as a result of plunging into the waters to escape the springing leopard and was attempting to regain her composure … when she glimpsed Vandhiyathevan approach. A pleasurable wave of exhilaration washed over her and she screwed her eyes shut, utterly overwhelmed …

… and completely unaware of Karikalar stretching out a hand, grabbing Vandhiyathevan by the wrist and practically pushing him towards Nandhini while striking out in her direction; wholly oblivious of his raising her from the lake and, holding her close to himself almost in an embrace, wading through the water and then climbing the stairs; entirely ignorant of his identity as he lowered her gently to the ground, and kept her eyes closed until Karikalar, by now concerned, put his finger under her nose to check her breathing … at which point she decided that having condemned Vandhiyathevan enough with peace and quiet, it was time to redeem his pitiful self. Determined to flood his awareness with her pure, unadulterated love, she fluttered her eyelids and lifted them a bare crease, her vision overflowing with boundless affection and intense eagerness—

—only to practically leap away and cower at a little distance, as she realized her mistake.

The expression of severe disappointment that flitted across Manimekalai's countenance in that instant sent Karikalar into peals of merry laughter.

"Heavens, my girl, such enthusiasm to escape me—but why this loathing, pray?"

"Merely a woman's natural reaction upon encountering a stranger, *Ayya*?" She countered, as best as she could.

"Good God, Manimekalai—you've relegated me to the wastes of anonymity, have you? Even while they are moving heaven and earth to bind us in wedlock?"

“Only if their attempts succeed would you be retrieved from the wastes of anonymity and relegated to the warmth of acquaintance, *Swami*. Until then—a stranger, aren’t you?”

“But it’s within your power to indicate your preference, surely?”
The Kadambur princess spent a few moments in reverie, before finally raising eyes brimming with intelligence to his. “You’re the Chozha scion, *Ayya*—omniscient above all; surely you oughtn’t to converse with me thus? Surely you ought to submit your questions to those who are most eligible to answer them … such as my father?”

“And if he should signify his consent … would you?”

“If he truly does consent and asks mine, I shall certainly offer an answer … the mere idea of speaking with you on such matters makes me bashful; it’s only gratitude that prompts my patience—gratitude for having saved me from the jaws of a leopard and the waters of a lake—”

“Clever, clever girl,” Karikalar chuckled, once more. “You lack neither wit nor willfulness, but you were deceived just this once all the same; do not seek to do the same to me, will you?”

“What on earth is this that you say, *Ayya*? I, a hapless girl, to trick you—whatever for? And why?”

“I see no further reason to beat around the bush, young lady and so, let’s have the word without the bark on it: would you have employed such harsh language had it been Vandhiyathevan in my place? Vandhiyathevan who gathered you in his arms? Wasn’t that why you screwed your eyes shut … and opened them with such fervour?” Karikalar could barely restrain his glee. “Come now, out with it; you *were* dismayed, weren’t you, my poor girl?”

Manimekalai hesitated, overwhelmed by a wave of shyness that held more than a hint of blind panic. “It—it appears that you know my

heart, Sire," she offered finally, gathering, somehow, the shreds of her tattered composure. "Why must you torment me so, then?"

"I do indeed know your heart, Manimekalai—and likewise do I know Vallavarayan's … which is why I'm in a turmoil of regret, for he deserves not your pure, unadulterated devotion, my dear. Ah, look at him with Nandhini this very moment, indulging in talk and laughter! Witness the delight that lights up Nandhini's face!"

Manimekalai did, certainly look in the direction he pointed. What she saw in that moment—an exceedingly brief moment—injected a drop of implacable resentment into her hitherto chaste, innocent heart … and poisoned it forever.

***

Nandhini and Vandhiyathevan were, indeed, lost in conversation at that point. One of her slender shoulders was bleeding sluggishly from a scratch courtesy the last, death throes of the leopard.

Unlike her Kadambur counterpart, the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani had neither closed her eyes nor seemed in a tearing hurry to detach herself from Vandhiyathevan's embrace; if anything, it was the Vaanar warrior who scrambled ashore and once on land, practically dropped her to the ground as though she were not an exquisitely fair burden but a flaming ember that threatened to scorch his hands. In truth, despite having been in the cold water for an appreciable amount of time, Nandhini's skin was hot to the touch.

A nameless, indefinable dread wound fearsome tendrils around his heart; his limbs trembled with a nervous fear …
… none of which escaped Nandhini's notice. "Such apprehension, *Ayya*. Why?" She needled gently, eyes glinting with mischief. "You didn't mistake me for the leopard, did you? Or was it, perhaps, your intention to save that feline—and you're regretting rescuing me in its stead?"

“Pray, *pray* do not torment with these torturous comments, *Ammani*. All I felt was a certain unease—understandable, I think—at having had to subject you to my touch while attempting a rescue—”

“Entirely understandable, as you say, for your discomfort is the consequence of a guilty heart, isn’t it?”

“I’m afraid I’m unaware of any crime, *Devi*.”

“You are, are you? But what a wonderfully adaptable conscience! Unaware of a single crime … while you begged my assistance to enter the Thanjai fort and I obliged by offering my own signet ring—which you used towards your own nefarious ends by sneaking into my *anthappuram*, a woman’s domain, in the dead of the night—a presumption from which I sought to save you, even then. And how did you repay my timely service, *Ayya*? You fled the fort like a lowly burglar without a word of farewell, without even my knowledge. You swore that you’d return to me once you’d met Pazhaiyarai’s Ilaiya Piratti—a pledge that I’m still waiting for you to fulfill. Pray, answer me: are these not crimes in your book?”

“They are and I have not the slightest qualm in confessing to them—but every single one of them can be justified by an excellent motive. I am but a servant, *Ammani* and bound, especially to serve Aditha Karikalar’s slightest command; if you would but consider the delicacy of my position, you wouldn’t constrain me thus—”

“Indeed; you’d require the crown prince’s explicit sanction even to save a woman from the snapping jaws of a leopard—his express approval to bring ashore a lady drowning in a lake … ah, do not assume my ignorance, for I was observing every last detail: the prince’s overpowering eagerness as he rushed to Manimekalai’s rescue! He’d have been jubilant if I’d suffocated to death with lungs full of water—but you’ve managed to bring his castles in the air crashing down with your half-baked assumption of a saviour’s guise —”

“Pray do not speak thus, *Ammani*; Aditha Karikalar has journeyed all the way from Kanchi, after all, only in obedience to you—”

“A journey you sought to prevent by rushing here posthaste in obedience to Ilaiya Piratti … but all your attempts to move heaven and earth in a bid to prevent exactly such a meeting failed, didn’t they? And fail indeed they will—spectacularly, disastrously—as long as you interfere in any scheme of mine!”

These words—far too carefully chosen, it seemed, for casual conversation—served to ratchet Vandhiyathevan’s already alarming levels of anxiety. His mind poised on the brink of chaos, he leveled a deep, unblinking stare at her face to divine the implication of her words—only to be doomed to disappointment: Nandhini’s ravishing countenance reflected no change whatsoever, and was wreathed in her customary devastating smile.

“Your face confesses to your manifold crimes. Remember that *Amavaasai* midnight not so long ago, when you walked straight into my clutches at the enemy’s *pallippadai*? One gesture from me and my men would have annihilated you. Even at that moment I sought to spare you—and this is how you repay me; this is how you convey your thanks. Never in all my life have I ever met with such a despicable example of an ingrate …!”

“Oh, my heart is positively overflowing with gratitude towards you, *Devi*, I swear—”

“And yet, in all the days we’ve spent here, in this place, never did you seek to express it—not even engaged in a half-hearted attempt. How, then, can I possibly believe you?”

“I was rather hoping for a private opportunity to fulfill my obligations … one which never really occurred.”

“An opportunity that you never tried to engineer. Not a sign nor gesture did you offer either through eyes or expression; not once did

you turn in my direction in all this time; why?”

“You are, after all, the faithful consort, the *dharmapathini* of Chozha Nadu’s *Dhanaadhikaari* …”

“You mock me, in other words, as the wife of a *kizhavan*, a doddering old man …”

“Banishment to the bowels of hell would be my fate if I intended any such disrespect, *Devi*.”

“Heavens, no, don’t! However you choose to address me, pray do not employ the term *Pazhuvettarayar’s dharmapathini*, henceforth, for I am not his wife—”

“*Ayyo*, what’s this that you say?”

“The bare truth. Dragging a woman against her will and trapping her in a palace hardly makes her a consort, does it?”

“As a member of Thamizh womanhood, *Devi*, you’d do nothing that even hints at dishonour to your sex.”

“I’m not exactly unaware of the sacred tenets of Thamizh womanhood. Generations of my ancestors fell in love with and wedded the men of their choice; not for a moment did they submit to the indignities of forced marriage—”

“You, however …”

“I can anticipate your question: you’re about to ask why, then, did I? Why subjugate to Pazhuvettarayar’s tyranny? I had a motive, believe me—a most important one. The women of ancient Thamizhagam possess another defining characteristic; never, not ever do they fail to avenge the horrible injustices inflicted upon them … *Ayya*, you couldn’t help me realize my love—but surely you could extend a hand in exacting revenge upon my foes?”

These last of Nandhini's soft words were doubly devastating to Vandhiyathevan: they seemed to explode upon his head like the celestial *Vajrayudham* even as they smote upon his ears like deafening thunder.

"*Devi*, what on earth—Good God, *Devi*," he spluttered and stammered as though suffocating under the combined effects of her presence and powerful emotion. "What's this you speak of? Love? And … and revenge? What do I have to do with your love … or revenge with it, either?"
"Everything. But this isn't the time to elaborate on that connection … for, look: the prince and Manimekalai are approaching with every moment. A visit to my chambers at midnight tomorrow—and I might reveal my secret."

"But—how *can* I, Devi? You dwell in the *anthappuram*, after all, and to sneak there, in the dead of the night—"

"Which you did accomplish once, if memory serves me right—except that you slipped out. Surely you can reverse that feat if you chose?" She paused. "If you put your mind to it …"

Vandhiyathevan's stupefaction was now complete. His eyes flew to hers in stunned incomprehension … but Nandhini's expression shifted not a whit.

It remained exactly the same, a radiant smile playing across that ravishing countenance.

Chapter 45

“You’re my sister!”

Crown prince and Kadambur princess approached, and finally stood by the two other participants of the erstwhile leopard and lake debacle—but while Vandhiyathevan had been the one subjected to Karikalar’s stare until then, it was Nandhini who was now the object of his sharp scrutiny … a scrutiny that instantly brought to attention the jagged, red scratches on her cheek and shoulder, ominously oozing blood.

“*Ayyo*!” He cried out impulsively as he raised his eyes to her face, the injuries startling him out of silence. “Did that wretched beast hurt you, then?”

“Only my flesh, *Ayya*; not my heart.”

The words pierced his, though … but before he could find a fitting retort, stumbling through the quagmire that clogged his mind, Manimekalai had bounded towards her mentor. “Indeed, that leopard has slashed you viciously, *Akka*—thank heavens I brought some *anjanam*—come; let me anoint you with some this very moment; you’ll heal and be alright in no time!”

“I need not your remedies for these paltry bruises, my dearest sister, for they are naught; I’ve sustained and recovered from far too many to feel pain … you’d do better with *anjanam* for my soul—you wouldn’t happen to have some of that, would you?”

“As it so happens, *Akka*, I do,” Manimekalai promised as she took Nandhini by the hand and led her towards the marble *mandapam*.

The princes, both Vaanar and Chozha strolled in their wake, finally relaxing upon a marble bench placed conveniently under a vast, shady mango tree.

“The sooner we leave here the better, *Ayya*,” Vandhiyathevan murmured. “Our tardiness might rouse the worst of suspicions in Kandamaaran and his father.”

“They can hardly lop off our heads, can they? Who cares in the least about their stuffy opinions? Or any others’, for that matter? All I’m concerned about, frankly, are the sentiments of those two women yonder,” Karikalar retorted. “We’ll bid our farewells once they’ve returned.”

Manimekalai and Nandhini duly did so, now refreshingly attired in a new set of clothes and appropriate ornaments; the latter’s cheek and shoulder were further adorned with *anjanam*, successfully disguising angry bruises.

“We were just waiting to take our leave,” Karikalar volunteered.

“Very pretty speaking but outrageous, for it’s well beyond high noon; you may leave and with our blessings only after sharing our repast—else Sambuvaraiyar’s beloved daughter will never forgive me,” Nandhini quipped.

“We’ll stay, subject to one stipulation,” Karikalar bargained. “I see that Manimekalai has made her good her claim about applying patent balm for your wounds—but didn’t she mention something about *anjanam* for the soul as well? Reveal it, and we might tarry awhile.”
“Surely we could hazard a guess ourselves,” Nandhini bantered, for her part. “Instead of waiting to ask her.”

“She may have referred to that universal cure of time—merciful forgetfulness,” Karikalar hazarded, duly following her suggestion.

“Unlikely,” the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani countered. “For the heart harbours wounds, sometimes, that never heal despite the long passage of time.”

“In the case of women, though, there’s an excellent *anjanam* for heart’s ease,” Vandhiyathevan interjected. “Tears.”

“And of course, the prince of Vallam has been waiting for exactly this moment to launch an attack against females, on cue,” she retorted. “Not that he’s entirely accurate. Some wounds sustained by the heart deprive you of the solace of tears, for they debilitate you until you’re too weak to even weep. How then, can it be a soothing salve for pain?”

“You may as well tell us what you think, since we’re both wrong,” Vandhiyathevan invited.

“Why not? Certainly I shall reveal, my darling sister, that you mean the balm that eases the soul through the ear, don’t you? You refer to music—the sweet melodies of the *yazh*, the flute and a charming voice—as that which brings glorious relief to agony; *anjanam* for an injured heart?”

“Indeed, *Akka*, but … how did you know?”

“Surely I’ve mentioned that I’m a *mandhirakkaari* with a host of spells at my disposal? That I have the unique power of divining the innermost thoughts of others? And you, *Ayya*?” Nandhini turned swiftly to the men. “Do the two of you agree upon this truly celestial characteristic of music? That it can ease the gravest of pain and soothe the deepest ache?”

“Certainly we do—not to mention accepting the sting of defeat that we couldn’t guess the answer … and now, I recall the detail that’s been nagging the recesses of my memory: Kandamaaran mentioning Manimekalai’s gift for music—and her skill with the *yazh*.”

“Ah, to possess a brother such as him! Every single day spent without singing his darling sister’s praises is a day, it seems, that might as well have not been, to the Kadambur prince … but yes, his claims about her talent with the instrument aren’t without foundation.

Indeed, she's actually brought her *yazh* all the way here—but my ignorance of *gaanavithai* being fairly well-documented, your presence today has spared her the dreadful fate of edifying such a musically challenged soul such as I. Surely your courageous defense of us hapless females from a dangerous feline practically demands repayment? You *must* partake, I beseech you, not only of a feast of delectable victuals, but also delightful music," Nandhini finished her persuasive speech.
Vandhiyathevan's subtle gesture to disregard this invitation, it must be admitted, didn't even catch Karikalar's eye. "The princesses' slightest wish is our royal command," he hastened to accept.

"Your *manoradham* is about to be fulfilled, Manimekalai—do go and see if the preparations are almost done and if they're not, hurry them, won't you?" The Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani chivvied her companion.

Even as Manimekalai obeyed instantly, Vandhiyathevan jumped up and stared around, here and there.

"I mentioned a few moments ago that I possessed the unique skill of divining people's thoughts, didn't? I should like to prove my power now, if I may," Nandhini threw out a casual remark, having observed his behaviour. " … by revealing what races through the Vallam prince's mind this very instant."

"Do it, why don't you?" Karikalar encouraged her with a chuckle.

"He's ruing the chivalrous impulse that saved these women from a rampaging leopard, and musing that it mightn't have been all that terrible if we'd been mincemeat in its stomach."

Karikalar laughed outright as he turned to his companion. "Is that so indeed, my friend?"

"Not in the least, *Ayya*—but to conjecture that I might've been thinking about these ladies and the leopard isn't all that far off the

mark," Vandhiyathevan quipped. "I *was* wondering about them—marveling, to be very specific, about how that wretched feline, after having been in their clutches, managed to escape alive!"

"What on earth's this farrago of nonsense, *Thambi*?" The prince jumped up, staring all around him. "That thing to still be alive—again? Wait, didn't we see its lifeless body floating upon the surface? Where's it now?"

"Over there!" Vallavarayan pointed out.

At a little distance from them—the distance of a shout, as it's said—could be glimpsed, amidst the thickly clustering tree branches, the waterline with the princesses' boat tethered at one point … and there was the diehard leopard, trying with all its last, faltering strength to scramble aboard the craft upon stumbling front legs.

"Ah, this cat truly must possess nine lives—what tenacity!"

"Come, *Ayya*; let's not waste time in dispatching it from earth," Vandhiyathevan announced. "An injured leopard is doubly dangerous."

"Ah, but why must the Vaanar warrior trouble himself and your royal highness to butcher one lonely, injured leopard undoubtedly on its last legs? Let me send Manimekalai in your stead; she shall dispatch that animal with a slash of her tiny dagger!" Nandhini retorted.

"Well, that's certainly put us in our place. Witness the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani's excellent opinion about our collective valour, my friend. Must I really accompany you, under the circumstances? Wouldn't you rather go alone?"

"Or send Manimekalai?" Nandhini chimed in.

"We could—but what if that redoubtable girl anointed the leopard's wounds and dragged him back from the precipice of death?"

Vandhiyathevan muttered doubtfully.

“What’re you hesitating for?” Karikalar demanded.
“Merely wondering if I should decapitate that wretched feline and offer its head at the Pazhuvoor Queen’s revered feet—and if at least that would satisfy her highness,” Vandhiyathevan snapped, before striding away at a pace too rapid for the rest to follow.

“Hark to that prating fool!” Karikalar began to chuckle. “How much courage do you have to screw up to chop off the head of a nearly-dead leop—” His eyes caught hers … and at the expression in them, the laughter died on his lips.

“Surely your royal highness would be the most suited to answer that?” Her tone was dulcet.

“Nandhini …” Karikalar’s body trembled and quivered; his voice was husky with emotion when he softly addressed her. “Nandhini, the *olai* you sent through Kandamaaran was my only reason to come here. Else, I wouldn’t have …”

“That you deigned to accept my humble request at least now, aeons later, demands my eternal gratitude,” she retorted. “My thanks to you, my lord.”

“I believed you to have consigned the past to where it belongs—to the lost realms of memory—I assumed that that was why you’d sent me an invitation—”

“Consigned to the lost realms of memory? How could I, *Ayya*? How could I possibly forget? Could you?” She paused. “*Have* you?”

“I haven’t … because I couldn’t, either. Once, you stood before me, your beautiful eyes brimming with tears—and begged a boon. Alas; I never granted your heart’s desire, gripped as I was by a terrible lust for blood … no, not one moment have I been able to forget! But—why did you send an *olai*? Why invite me all the way here?”

“Not once in the last three years have you condescended to visit Thanjai, *Ayya*—nor sought an audience with your ailing father …”

“Not just mine, Nandhini—”

“True; Ilaiya Piratti’s as well, and Ponniyin Selvar’s. But it’s your abandonment that pains him the most, I know … and since someone’s gone to the extraordinary trouble of informing him that my presence is the reason for your absence, he refuses to pursue an acquaintance with me, as well. *Ayya*, haven’t I suffered enough on your account?” Nandhini beseeched. “Must I endure these outrageous allegations too?”

“Allegations that might not be without some merit; you’re the reason I haven’t set foot in Thanjai.”

“In that case, I shall leave the city and you may enter with all pomp and circumstance, ascend your father’s *simmaasanam* and wear a resplendent crown of—”

“That day will never, ever come, Nandhini, for I’ve not the slightest inclination towards either throne or crown now; Madhuranthakan may ascend the Chozha *singaadhanam* and wear the coronet of a *samrajyam* with my goodwill.”

“Knowing him as well as you do, *Ayya*—do you really consider him capable in the slightest of ruling this massive empire? Even for a single day?”
“His deficiencies, whatever they may be, shall be more than made up for by the capable Pazhuvettarayars … ably assisted by your own gracious self, of course.”

“Your aspirations become clearer by the moment; I shall depart not only the Pazhuvoor palace but Thanjai too and then, you may arrive to—”

“Heavens, no; you misunderstand me. It was never my intention to—Good God, haven’t I hurt you enough to add the unforgivable crime of driving you out of the Pazhuvoor complex as well, to the list? I’d rather not, if you please.”

“Then, *Ayya*—is there no way for the both of us to reside in Thanjai? Surely such a large city could host two humans? Surely we might find the space to co-exist in the capital? After all, we wouldn’t even have to set eyes on each other—”

“There wouldn’t be the slightest need to meet, yes … but what about the mind? What about the thoughts racing endlessly through the sub-conscious, wondering, musing, thinking—why, didn’t you mention just a while ago about not being able to forget the past; about not being able to endure heartache? Well, I sustained injuries as well; my heart is wounded too … and if you couldn’t forget, neither could I.”

“Perhaps forgetfulness is a blessing beyond reach, but surely forgiveness isn’t? Surely you could find it in yourself to forgive my trespasses? After all these years?”

“You’ve committed no crime that requires my clemency, Nandhini—in fact, if anything, mine is the crime; I, the criminal and the one who ought to be offering an apology. It was with that intention that I started from Kanchi for I still had hopes of righting all between us … but for a piece of news I learnt on the way, which only served to increase my worthlessness—for I now knew that I didn’t even deserve to seek your pardon.”

“Seeking an apology certainly is unworthy of you, *Komagane* for you are the firstborn of an emperor, the blessed crown prince of a Chakravarthy who rules the world while I—I’m naught but an orphan abandoned by her own parents—”

“Hardly that, Nandhini.”

“You refer, I know, to *Dhanaadhikaari* Pazhuvettarayar’s gracious condescension in acknowledging me as his Ilaiya Rani—but still …”

“It isn’t just that … heavens, my tongue falters at the very idea of broaching the truth.”

“This hesitation is unnecessary, *Ayya*; you may divulge anything you please to a hapless female such as I—especially when random passersby do not pretend to any of your scruples and dare to approach with a passel of outrageous nonsense—when they feel not the slightest mortification in stepping up and offering the vilest, most unconscionable insults—”

“Not another moment shall I suffer such base behaviour, such indignities to your honour, Nandhini. One word—just one word from you, and they shall be dispatched to *Yamalokham* before I even consider any other task.”

“So you are and so you’ve always been, *Ayya*; extraordinarily compassionate to me … how well do I remember that you used to quarrel with even Pazhaiyarai’s Ilaiya Piratti as a child, on my behalf—and she your own sister, to boot—”

“So are you, Nandhini. You’re no less my sibling; you’re my sister, and I’m your brother!”

“Your sentiments do you credit, not to mention your lineage, *Komagane*—and naturally so, for I’m wedded to another. But how may I consider as my brother the Chakravarthy’s blessed son, he who is clearly marked by destiny to rule all the three worlds—”

“I’m afraid you’ve misunderstood my meaning. Nandhini, you truly are my sister—the daughter of an Emperor!”

She broke into merry peals of laughter. “I’m not sure which of us is the lunatic here: are your wits scrambled—or is my brain muddled by *sithabramai*?” she gurgled, finally.

“Neither.”

“Then … surely you’re making game of this naïve fool?”

“Look up. Into my eyes. Do I really seem to be mocking you?”

“Look into *my* face, *Ayya*, and tell me this: do I really seem like a Chakravarthy’s daughter? Does my face actually possess something of that elusive royal radiance? That intangible, indefinable grace that is the birthright of kings and queens?”

“I’ve been gazing at your countenance ever since you were a child of five, Nandhini; gazing, and been absolutely dumbstruck at features that glowed with untarnished beauty—but only now do I realize the reason for such unearthly charm, once I’d left Kanchi in the dust, galloping towards Kadambur, somewhere betwixt the two. For, you see, of all the women who married into the Chozha clan, none could ever hope to rival Kalyani of the Vaithumbaraayars for sheer perfection of features. My grandmother lives still, in Pazhaiyarai. She’s seventy, now—but the whole world marvels the celestial beauty that nearly blinds those who set eyes on her ravishing face … her absolutely stunning face that is your inheritance, for all that divine loveliness has sought and taken refuge, in you. Not in me. Not Ilaiya Piratti. Not even Arulmozhi but you, through my father …”

“What on earth is this that you say, *Ayya*? Good God, my brains truly must be addled—or maybe my ears …”

“Neither is at fault, Nandhini. You are my father’s daughter and therefore, my sister. Long before he wedded my mother, the Chakravarthy met and fell in love with a *maatharasi* on one of the islands dotting the coast of Ilankai … and bound himself to her in a celestial bond; *gaandharva manam*. You were born to her,” Karikalar declared, in a voice that overflowed with tenderness. “… and are thus, my sibling.”

She sat staring at him for long moments, as though struck dumb by a bolt from the blue, almost paralyzed by this unexpected revelation. And then, by degrees, her countenance, clouded by a miasma of emotions, cleared.

“Was this what you learnt once you’d departed from Kanchi?” She asked, finally.
“Indeed—and things that had never been quite clear until then, suddenly seemed to make a lot of sense,” he offered.

“And who was the source of this piece of news, this benevolent harbinger of clarity, *Komagane*? The prince of Vallam?”

“Why, yes, of course—not that he was the source so much as an envoy, passing on Ilaiya Piratti Kundhavai’s message.”

“Ah! How tenacious their efforts; how bull-headed their determination to separate us from the days of yore … and yet, they’re not done; their schemes, plots and conspiracies see no end.”

“Hardly those, Nandhini; you couldn’t be more wrong. I confess that Periya Piratti Sembian Maadevi’s insistence on keeping us apart made no sense to me as a boy; I remember how furious I was at her endless attempts at wrecking our friendship, but now … good God, now, when I realize just what an appalling catastrophe she saved us from—but she did save us, even if she could have just divulged all, there and then. Withholding the truth was the gravest of injustices to you and the worst of evil, to me. Let bygones be bygones though; we shall make a pact to consign the past to the past. Let’s forgive, even if we couldn’t bear to forget.”

“Ah,” Nandhini paused. “And did Vallam’s most honoured highness bar your path to indulge in just this choice fairytale, *Ayya*? Or were there others?”

“Hardly a tale, I don’t think … why do you?”

“Hardly a piece of news to be believed quite that swiftly, which is perhaps why I find it hard to swallow, I suppose. Because …” she was silent for a moment. “Had I in truth been an emperor’s daughter, would I have been subject to a fate such as this? Would I have had to endure such miseries, such terrible indignities, such stifling grief? Assuming that Vandhiyathevar’s information was accurate indeed … was that all he mentioned? Was there nothing else?”

“Well …” Karikalar seemed reluctant. “Well, he divulged something else too: that you were hand-in-glove with Pandiya plotters; that you had pledged to annihilate the Chozha clan, sworn a blood oath to raze us to the ground, and that you worshipped a dazzling broadsword emblazoned with the sign of a fish for this very purpose. And—and that you’d even crowned a mere child as king, near a *pallippadai* in the dense jungles of the Kollidam banks, but … ignore all of this, Nandhini. Bundle it away as the relict of a horrifying past and look to the future, for you’re Sundara Chozha Chakravarthy’s daughter; a scion of the Chozhas and like me, heir to all our honour and glory. You possess a right to all we possess, as our beloved sister … and from this moment on, my duty, first and foremost, shall be to avenge every insult offered to you; right every wrong; reverse every slight; redeem every injustice.”

“If you truly believed every word of what you just revealed, then why, after having journeyed all the way to Kadambur, tarry all these days? Why refrain from a meeting? Why desist from any effort at discussion?”

“The chaos enveloping my mind was the reason; all this was too new, too confusing, too … tumultuous. I needed the time and space to subdue the turmoil and bring my turbulent heart into some kind of order, not to mention seeking the right opportunity to engage in a detailed explanation rather than a hasty, half-baked one. This isn’t, after all, the sort of subject I could tear open in public, is it? Fortunately, I didn’t have to work myself to the bone; a wild boar and a leopard took it upon themselves to create the ideal situation—”

“Jungle beasts are indeed ferocious predators, *Ayya*, but surely not as vicious as their human counterparts?” Nandhini interjected at this point. “A truth that revealed itself to me in all glory only today.”

“My dear sister, just a while ago you wondered if the past could just be bundled away into the recesses of our memory and I concurred. I even suggested that what couldn’t be forgotten could be forgiven … but received no reply.”

“I might pardon every single instance of injustice, every count of crime, every last scorching burn of betrayal at your hands, *Komagane*; I might even, as you so magnanimously suggest, forget them … except for one. Not for a moment, nor under any circumstance shall I either forgive or forget your unbearable treachery this day.”

“Good God, Nandhini—what on earth have I done today? Nothing—nothing against my conscience, surely?”

“Allow me to enlighten you. Would you kindly look at that *thoorthan* coming up, that rogue?”

“Who’s a—Vallavarayan, you mean?”

“The very same; the scoundrel who promised a leopard’s head but now strolls towards us with empty hands—that one. He arranged to meet me in Thanjai once, you know. And prattled on endlessly about considering it his life’s salvation if my toe touched him … not that I would’ve even deigned to kick him, the bastard. Of course, he scampered away like the rat he is when I threatened to call my servants on him … which explains why he’s been stuffing your naïve head with these preposterous and plainly fanciful stories—because I wouldn’t accept his shameless advances. And this, from a wretch who swore to bring me your head on a platter if I so much as whispered the word! It doesn’t take much to understand why he spun such a web of outrageous lies—to keep you from learning the truth; he was terrified I might expose him. Entirely understandable why he

might have wanted to head you off the path to Kadambur—but since he couldn't, he went where you did, like the shadow following the substance. And this—this wretched rapscallion, this lecherous libertine is whom you chose as my rescuer—this immoral villain who practically embraced me, his hands all over my body as he carried me to shore … and not satisfied with engineering this—this *rescue*, you stayed on the banks, watching every appalling moment! Tell me, your royal highness: how on earth am I supposed to forget this dreadful crime? Or even, God forbid, forgive this trespass?"

The Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani's scathing indictment, delivered in a low voice raging with fury, her exquisite eyes well-nigh snapping with frustrated wrath had its effect: the ghastly denunciation literally made Karikalar's head spin. And not just his muddled mind either, but the marble *mandapam*, the lake and its mirrored surface, the jungle and its dense trees … everything spun, spun like a whirling, twirling, mad dervish.

"Nandhini, my sister," he spoke finally, managing, somewhat to regain his shredded composure and steady his voice that threatened to tremble. "Could this—could all this possibly be true? I'm not sure what I can or cannot believe; surely Vandhiyathevan couldn't be all of the dreadful things you just described? Surely not such a hardened criminal, a rogue beyond reprieve … good God, and here I was just moments ago, planning to plight his troth to young, naïve Manimekalai—"

"You needn't take just my word for it, *Ayya*, for well do I know your penchant for haste; your instinct for impulse—but don't. Not this time," Nandhini counseled. "Pray wait for two days—merely two days, your highness, and observe his behaviour, his movements. And then, Sire," she paused delicately. "Then, you will know."

Hidden Meanings and Explanations

Anjanam

Kohl, a black, sticky paste usually used to line the eyes; sometimes used as an ointment for cuts and bruises—and to ward off the evil eye. Also known in Thamizh as *mai*.

The distance of a shout …

The Thamizh original of this charming phrase, as used by Kalki, is *koopidu thooram.* Literally, the distance at which you can hear someone call, or shout for you.

Chapter 46

The Drifting Boat

While Vandhiyathevan approached swiftly from one end, Manimekalai hastened from the other, calling out “The food is ready, *Akka*,” as she did.

Barely a few moments remained before their erstwhile companions reached them and Karikalar turned to look about in both directions, before speaking. “Nandhini, it wasn’t just Vallavarayan who threw himself across my path to prevent my journey to Kadambur; a Vaishnavite by the name of Azhwarkkadiyaan brought me the same news, didn’t he? And Mudhanmandhiri Aniruddhar, my father’s beloved friend and one who is worthy of my devotion sent a similar message, didn’t he?”

“Ah, that most venerable chief minister of Chozha Nadu, as dear to your father as life … which is why he seeks to deprive him of it; that much vaunted intellectual worthy of your devotion—which is why he seeks to deprive you of your birthright—”

“What? Why?”

“You’re a frenzied maniac and a Godless heathen—or so he believes. What he desires, above all, is to plant your brother onto the Chozha throne, convert him into a raging Vaishnavite fanatic and

thus, the entire *samrajyam*—every subject a flaming devotee of Vishnu, breathing fire and fury … an ambition that was smashed to smithereens, dashed to dust when your *thambi* was lost at sea—"

"I'm not sure what that has to do with preventing my progress to Kadambur."

"An extraordinarily great deal—since I might well divulge their precious secrets, betray their so-called confidence —"

"And what would you know of those, pray?"

"*Ayya*, you've forgotten, it seems, that I am sibling to the Vaishnavite Azhwarkkadiyaan."

"Are you indeed? And do you truly expect me to believe this outrageous fairytale?"

"I don't—because, neither do I. It *is* true, though, that I was raised in his father's home which led to his calling me his sister. It's always been a habit of his to declare that I'm an incarnation of the divine Andaal—and it's ever been his dearest hope that I'd traipse the whole world with him, singing aloud Azhwars' *pasurams* and spreading the godly message of Vaishnava *sampradaayam*, its sacred traditions!"

"His dearest hope to transform you into a Vaishnavite *sanyaasini*, like Buddhist *bikshunis*?" Aditha Karikalar queried. "Was that it?"

"Not quite so lofty as all that, I'm afraid; his one true desire, ensconced deep in his heart was that I might wed him and thus, we'd wander about the world as man and wife—and that, well, I might produce a great many children to spread the word of Vishnu, I dare say."

"*Cheechee*—to compare that monkey-faced man to your—to put you and Thirumalai even in the same sentence … good God, how could

he even dare—”

“The fault of my stars, *Ayya*; the terrible betrayal of providence and the stroke of the worst fortunes, for every man who approaches me does so with just one, audacious, outrageous intention …”

“Hardly astonishing, considering the instincts of even that doddering *kizhavan* Pazhuvettarayan.”

“Pray do not direct the slightest abuse at the Pazhuvoor lord in my hearing, *Komagane*. He desired me, and legitimized that desire before the whole world by making it sacred; gave this orphan more than refuge by taking me into his *thirumaaligai*, his palace, and conferring upon me the title of his queen consort, his *pattamakishi*—”

“Very pretty talking, I’m sure, and does you credit … but what of your own sentiments, Nandhini? Do you worship him as your husband, lord and master? Really and truly? If that be the case …”

“No, not at all. I harbour towards him the greatest of gratitude but never did I assume a wifely attitude. I may have been a child of poverty and abandoned to abject misery—but to one and only one man did I ever surrender my pitiful heart. Not for anyone or anything have I altered my sentiments nor offered it elsewhere … and neither will I.”

“And who—who might be that most fortunate of men, Nandhini? Wait, no—you needn’t answer. Tell me this, instead: who are you? If not my father’s daughter; not my sister and certainly not Azhwarkkadiyaan’s sibling … then *what* are you? This is all I need to know. Just reveal the secret of your identity,” Karikalar pleaded. “ … or I truly will lose my wits!”

“Believe me when I say that there’s nothing I wish to tell you more … but for the fact that your companion approaches and likewise, does mine; be sure that I shall make known all to you, when next the opportunity arises,” Nandhini promised. To Vallavarayan who had, by

now, drawn up to within speaking distance, she now turned. “Well, *Ayya*? Returned to us empty-handed, have you? Where on earth’s the head of the leopard, pray?”

“I must admit to defeat, *Devi*,” Vandhiyathevan confessed. “I possess not the good fortune of presenting that wretched feline’s decapitated head at thy gracious feet.”

“Ah, so much for your much-vaunted valour, then! And what of all those precious verses you spouted of your peerless clan’s matchless courage? Your stalwart ancestors? Their phenomenal, full-blooded exploits in gory agriculture? Didn’t you brag about them planting entire fields with the heads of their foes, the formidable *moovendhars*?”

“Why, what song would that be?” Karikalar piped up.

“Will you do the honours, *Ayya*? Or shall I?” Nandhini raised her eyebrows in Vandhiyathevan’s direction.

“I’m afraid I don’t really remember reciting any such, *Rani*,” he hedged.

“Oh, but I do, *Ayya*—and in glorious, excruciating detail; do lend your ears:

Senai thazhaiyaaki, senkuruthi neer thekki
Aanai mithitha arunchetril—maana baran
Paavendhar thamvendhan vaanan parithu nattaan
Moovendhar thangal mudi!

Hark, *Komagane*—hark at this poetic gem! You, at least, constrained yourself to decapitating only Pandiyan, but our hero’s ancestors were such magnificent specimens of warriorhood that they chopped the heads of not one, but all three representatives of Thamizh royalty — and went so far as to sow them in their fields!”

Karikalar's contorted countenance was a picture of naked hatred and indescribable revulsion. "Wonderful, to be sure—excellent indeed," He cackled. "A truly exemplary exhibition of ploughing and sowing!" And he exploded into peals of maniacal laughter.

Such was Vandhiyathevan's discomfiture that he could barely raise his eyes to the crown prince's twisted features. "*Devi*," He managed to stutter somewhat, finally. "I—I really don't recall mentioning such a verse to your highness …"

"Well, and what if you didn't? Consider this a marvelous opportunity to acquaint yourself and revel in the splendor of ancestral glory at least now, if not before—and while you're at it, ponder the unaccountable mystery of being the scion of a clan that sowed decapitated *moovendhar* heads … but couldn't, somehow, bring himself to bring forth the head of a lone, pathetic, half-dead leopard!"

"That wounded excuse for a dangerous feline was already dead, *Devi*; the last thing I wanted to do was to behead a corpse."

"How on earth—?" Karikalar started up. "But I saw it stumble into the boat with my own eyes!"

"And I was the one who brought the sight to your attention—but apparently it breathed its last once inside the craft," explained Vandhiyathevan. "Perhaps it expired with mortification at having injured the hallowed person of the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani?"

Karikalar's face lost some of its severity at this courtierly witticism. "It could've done so in the lake itself then, surely?" He countered, with a smile. "Why clamber so laboriously into the boat?"

"Likely, like me, it dreaded the water," his companion quipped. "Of all those devised by man and nature, death by drowning is the one that terrifies me the most."

“And yet, you hesitated not a whit just moments ago, jumping into the lake with alacrity! Such compassion, such consideration for the plight of us hapless females, I presume.”

“You presume wrong, *Devi*, for I dread women even more than the water; had it not been for the prince’s inexorable command, I wouldn’t have put myself in the way of peril … an entirely chivalrous gesture that proved as unnecessary as the peril itself, in the last few moments.”

“Indeed, your terrors are all for yourself and not others; they could drown and die, for all you care!” Nandhini retorted.

Manimekalai’s expression revealed that none of this razor-edged repartee was quite to her taste. “Our meal is going cold as we speak, *Akka*,” she interjected. “Let’s begin, shall we?”
The quartet made a concerted move towards the marble *mandapam*.

The Kadambur princess cast enquiring eyes on the Vallam prince as she walked. Intuition, that natural instinct that ruled her strong and true, warned that his heart was in some sort of turmoil; ignorant she may have been as to its exact cause, but that Karikalar and Nandhini were in some way the reason, she realized without a doubt. *Whatever your apprehensions, I shall stay by you always; whoever your enemies, I shall stand by you at all times*, she tried to convey through *nayana baashai*; *Do not worry,* she tried to comfort, her expressive eyes overflowing with reassurance and relief … all to no avail, for not once did he turn in her direction, seemingly drowned, to all intents and purposes, in a veritable ocean of agonizing anxiety.

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It isn’t entirely unnatural for our readers—especially those who have been following this saga for a long time—to have felt an overwhelming surge of revulsion at Nandhini Devi’s blatant betrayal and baseless allegations; nor outside the realm of possibility to have experienced loathing at such blithe aspersions upon

Vandhiyathevan's character. Yet, recall but what we know of her birth and life until this moment—and perhaps these might not be our instinctive reactions; nor will we be surprised at the venom in her words.

The basic tenets of human character, it's said, are woven into the very fabric of our psyche over generations; body and brain together borrowing the traits of ancestors to create the beings of today and tomorrow … tenets and traits that gradually evolve, according to acquired habits and changing circumstances. Mandhakini, debilitated by deafness and muteness, had spent almost all her life in the wild jungle; many were the terrifying ruses she had to use and cautionary strategies she had to employ, to save herself from prowling predators. As for the appalling kills she inflicted upon cruel beasts to save her skin … those were legion.

For aeons, her heart remained as still as a pool deep in the forest, untouched by the slightest ripple … until once, when the divine, delightful spring of love burst forth, sending waves of sheer, unadulterated joy into every corner—only to dry up very soon, transforming that once pristine, verdant landscape into a harsh and unforgiving desert. Fate had chosen an innocent soul devoid of any blemish whatsoever, and subjected it to the cruelest disappointment any could suffer … and the shock was so paralyzing that for a time, her wits were disordered; the days vague and the world around her, hazy.

But time managed what fate could not; it healed her raw, gaping wounds. Thawing to life where it had frozen deep within her heart, the spring of love bubbled forth once more; the passion she had once felt for Sundara Chozhar now transformed into powerful, abiding devotion to his son, Arulmozhi Selvan; sensuous love for a mate now sweet adoration for a child.

Hardly surprising, then, that Nandhini inherited many of Mandhakini's quirks; her unusual character traits—but life betrayed the daughter far, far worse than it had, the mother.

Destiny's unique brand of treachery began right at birth, when she was abandoned and left to the mercy and compassion of strangers, who offered her a refuge of sorts. If the mother's existence was a precarious one, tortured by beasts of the cruel jungle, her daughter's was even worse for she was tormented by beasts of civilization. The endless taunts and sneers endured at the hands of royalty during an impressionable childhood pierced her heart with the swiftness of steel—and hardened as cold diamond; the pain leeching into her body, heart, soul, morphing into virulent venom and from that, into something even worse: inexorable hatred.
The one antidote that might have soothed her unrelenting wrath, diffused her fury—the nectar of love and simple affection, were denied her completely. Never had she experienced anything close to that tender emotion: those she loved either ignored and eventually abandoned her mercilessly or, as a result of fate's cruel malice, died. Those she despised and insulted without impunity, however, lived wonderful lives filled with every delight and luxury.

What more ought to be needed, pray, to twist a woman's heart into a seething, roiling hell overflowing with hatred; to contaminate her soul with viciousness worse than even venom?

Nothing remained in her heart, it seemed, except the overpowering urge to wreak havoc upon her enemies; to avenge the insults of those who had betrayed, insulted, and otherwise ruined her. Fortunately, fate, which had dealt her a bad hand almost at every turn, appeared to have been strangely benevolent here: in her mother' womb, it had equipped her with treacherous instincts, steely nerves and a ruthless mind; dangerous plots and heinous schemes were her very blood of blood. What was left of such delicate emotions as love, gratitude and compassion were wiped without a trace by life's appalling trials, devastating horrors and endless miseries. Her soul was now as stone: just as intractable, immoveable, and unyielding.

We offered this insight into Nandhini's character, dear readers, in a bid to provide some understanding of the events that are about to unfold.

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Not that the much-vaunted midday meal was any more a success than the morning, for Nandhini, Karikalar and Vandhiyathevan seemed consumed by their own thoughts—a development that aggrieved Manimekalai the most.

What delightful dreams of convivial conversation and melodious music in the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani's divine company had she entertained, even as she planned the day's water-games and jungle feasts? And then, the crown prince and Vandhiyathevan had put in a most unexpected appearance, which ramped up her enthusiasm … only to die a deflated death, for neither the speech nor behaviour of the other three, loaded with meaning and implications beyond her imaginings, were satisfactory in the slightest.

The sharp twist of misery at seeing Nandhini and Vandhiyathevan so close together had dulled and faded away; her young heart, innocent as a child's, even feeling a twinge of mortification at having allowed the slightest resentment to cloud her perception. *How wrong of me to even think thus*, she consoled herself and prepared for an afternoon of unalloyed enjoyment … an expectation that was dashed to dust at the others' annoying and frankly outrageous expressions; their mysterious meanings couched in even more mystifying words. She neither liked, nor understood any of it.

The less of this puzzling undercurrent the better, she felt, and accordingly, turned to Nandhini, when their repast was done. "What about returning, *Akka*? Shall I send for the boat? Will our two guests accompany us or choose to ride home?" She asked, in quick succession.

Her piping voice dragged Karikalar to the outside world from whatever subconscious, surreal one he had been wandering in. “Ah, ah, wait, what was that?” He demanded, sitting up suddenly. “Go home, you say? And without listening to even a note of this young lady’s *yazh*? Never, not for a moment—come now, Nandhini, surely you haven’t forgotten? Manimekalai, surely you aren’t going to disappoint us?”
“Nothing has escaped my memory—but forgive me if I felt that neither you nor your friend seemed particularly in the mood for music,” Nandhini paused. “Rather, you fidgeted as though made to stand on a bed of thorns … but never let it be said that I stood in the way of your gratification. Manimekalai!” She called out, in her direction. “Pray, bring your *yazh*, will you?”
“Why, *Akka*?” That young woman, appropriately, chose this moment to play coy. “Why do you press me to play for those who profess no inclination for it?”

“Of course not, my dear; the prince, as you see, is all ears … and if his friend is unwilling, he may close his, by all means,” Nandhini quipped.

“Good God, I’m not the fiend you portray me to be,” Vandhiyathevan protested mildly. “I’m certainly no foe to music; far from it, in fact. There was Poonguzhali, a boat-girl in Kodikkarai, who sang this delightful song:

“Why anguish, my soul,
When tumbling seas lie smooth?”

My skin prickles with exhilaration even now, when I recall her glorious voice and lovely verse—”

“Some people prefer the songs of only a select few,” there was the suggestion of a pout in Manimekalai’s tone. “I’m not sure if you’ll find mine quite to your taste.”

“I, for one, am not going to let him be all that arbitrary over your performance, so you may rest assured,” Karikalar declared. “Now, where’s the *yazh*?”

Unable, and frankly unwilling to prevaricate any further, Manimekalai obliged. She seated herself gracefully upon the marbled steps of the *mandapam*, *yazh* in delicate hands, and began to tune it. Hers was a splendid instrument that possessed seven strings, each capable of holding one note, a *swaram*, for half a length while progressing to the next note, in the other.

Tuning complete, for the next few moments she proceeded to shower a medley of delightful melodies, demonstrating her prowess and proficiency to such an extent that both Aditha Karikalar and Vandhiyathevan forgot all niggling traces of their trials and gave themselves up completely to the music, luxuriating in its beauty.

Then, the Kadambur princess added another dimension to her already sublime performance by blending the vocal and the instrumental; her charming voice mingled with the *yazh* as she sang select *pasurams* of that divine trio Appar, Sambandhar and Sundarar for the others’ edification.

“Manimekalai,” Karikalar began, after an appreciable amount of time. “Your music is truly celestial, but your repertoire seems rather firmly devoted to, er, devotion, to the exclusion of everything. Now I, my dear, must confess that I’m really not of that persuasion; I reserve such lofty ideals to such paragons of piety as Madhuranthakan.” He paused. “You wouldn’t mind indulging in some romantic fare, would you?”

Manimekalai’s lovely cheeks dimpled with bashfulness; she hesitated, seemingly overcome.

“But why such reluctance, my girl? Neither I nor my companion shall misconstrue your intentions and consider ourselves your muse—so falter no more. Sing—sing without restraint!”

“Not that she’d care in the slightest if anyone did consider himself thus,” Nandhini retorted.

“How *could* you, *Akka*?” Manimekalai objected. “Especially with two men present—”

“Ah, but therein lies your mistake; could you consider them, by any measure, respectable specimens of manhood when they couldn’t even behead a dead leopard? And to think of all those extraordinary warrior tales of yore when men felled tigers, plucked teeth from their gaping maws while still alive—and adorned their womenfolk with these fearsome trophies! Long gone, those days, but be that as it may—sing, my dear,” Nandhini prompted her. “That beautiful melody from the other day; that one. Go on!”

Strumming her *yazh*, Manimekalai sang—and for some reason, her voice, charming until then, suddenly seemed more exquisitely ravishing with this lovely song than before, the notes surreal, the music heavenly and the performance a veritable shower of nectar upon not just the ears, but all senses:

“Iniya punal aruvi thavazh
Inbamalaich chaaralilae,
Kanikulavum maranizhalil
karampidithu ukanthathellaam
Kanavu thaanodi—sakiye,
Ninaivu thaanodi?

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Punnai maracholaiyile
Ponnolirum maalaiyile
Ennai varach cholli avar
Kannal mozhi pakarnthathellaam
Soppanamthaanodi—antha
arputham poyyodi?

***

Kattukkaaval than kadanthu
Kallaraip pol mella vanthu
Mattillaatha kaadhaludan
Katti mutham eenthathellaam
Nikazhnthathundodi—naangal
Makizhnthathundodi?

[Was it all a dream, my friend? Was it a dream … that we met, he and I, upon lush, verdant mountain slopes, misty with pristine waterfalls? Was it all a dream that he caught my hands in a lover's embrace, under trees heavy with fruit, casting cool, soothing shade? Was it all true, or a mere dream?

Was it all a dream, dear friend? Was it but a mirage, a magical interlude … that he begged me come, upon golden evenings, to the luscious Punnai orchard and spoke words of sweet love? Was it all true, or a passing fancy?
Was it all a dream? Was none of it real … that he deceived with ease the sternest guards, tiptoed up to me like a stealthy thief and with all the love he could muster, embraced me with a searing kiss? Was it all a dream, or were we truly lost in bliss?]

These and many more *kannis* or verses did Manimekalai sing, creating and blending newer ones with ever more alluring melodies until every haunting note submerged her enthralled audience into a veritable sea of music. Nandhini, who had hardened her heart as stone for various reasons, found her eyes brimming with tears; Aditha Karikalar seemed to have abandoned this world and wandered into another in speechless ecstasy while Vandhiyathevan —Vandhiyathevan, drawn into the surreal experience, often shook himself as though to tether himself to reality, raising his eyes to gaze at Manimekalai …

… only to realize that the Kadambur princess's gaze was firmly locked on to his, the whole time.
Ayyo, what have I done, he asked himself as his heart quivered and trembled at the implications of his realization. *How could I have served this young woman such a bad turn?*

Lost as all three were, tossed, endlessly, in a veritable maelstrom of emotions and music, none had noticed that the wind had been steadily gaining momentum or that the tiny, miniature waves steadily rippling the surface had swelled to monstrous giants thrumming through the waters. It was only when the hitherto gentle breeze, now roused to the fury of a gale, uprooted an entire tree and crashed it to the ground did all four finally startle awake, as though released from an otherworldly spell. They stared around themselves stunned, at the furiously raging wind, the pandemonium in the skies … and the seething, roiling lake, now practically unrecognizable, as massive waves rose and fell with a deafening roar: ***Ho***!

"*Ayyo*!" Nandhini jumped up suddenly. "The boat—where is it?" Indeed, the little craft was no longer where it had been tethered—and could be seen, when their straining eyes finally located it in the gloom, thrashing about helplessly amidst the cresting and falling waves, steadily drifting away. "*Ayyo*!" She screamed again. "What do we do now?"

"If the two of you are even moderately familiar with horses, now is the time to escape," Vandhiyathevan counseled. "We shall manage, somehow."

"Surely you aren't making sure we'll be pummeled and crushed to mush by the trees raining down upon us in this terrifying gale?" Nandhini shrieked.

"None of that, now," Karikalar soothed. "There's no need to take up so; surely we can wait out this storm right here? What on earth's the need to pelt home, anyway? We've food and provisions enough, and

Manimekalai to entertain us with sweet music," he pointed out. "Heavens, I haven't been this happy in ages!"

"I'm not sure that's the right thing to do, Sire. What must Sambuvaraiyar and Kandamaaran think of us?" His boon companion pointed out.

"Likely he overturned the boat when he went after that wretched leopard," Nandhini accused.

"Pray don't fasten blame upon him, *Akka*," Manimekalai leapt to Vandhiyathevan's defense, at once. "The craft was moored right by the shore when he arrived; that was not it." She looked around at them all. "Fear not; my father shall dispatch a fleet the moment he glimpses a hint of a storm!"
The Kadambur princess was proven to be right, within a while. Two barges were soon seen to be approaching the island—although, to call those elaborate vessels, sporting all the richness and adornments of royal equipages mere barges would be an insult; they were, in truth, almost ships. And in one of them stood Sambuvaraiyar himself, his face brightening considerably at the sight of all four, safe in the *mandapam*.

The erstwhile stranded quartet having clambered gratefully on board, the ships now began their ponderous return through the lake, its choppy, heaving surface tossed about by the gale … while, except for Sambuvaraiyar, within the hearts of the four seethed and churned an even greater storm, wreaking emotional havoc in its fury.

BOOK 4 IS CONCLUDED.